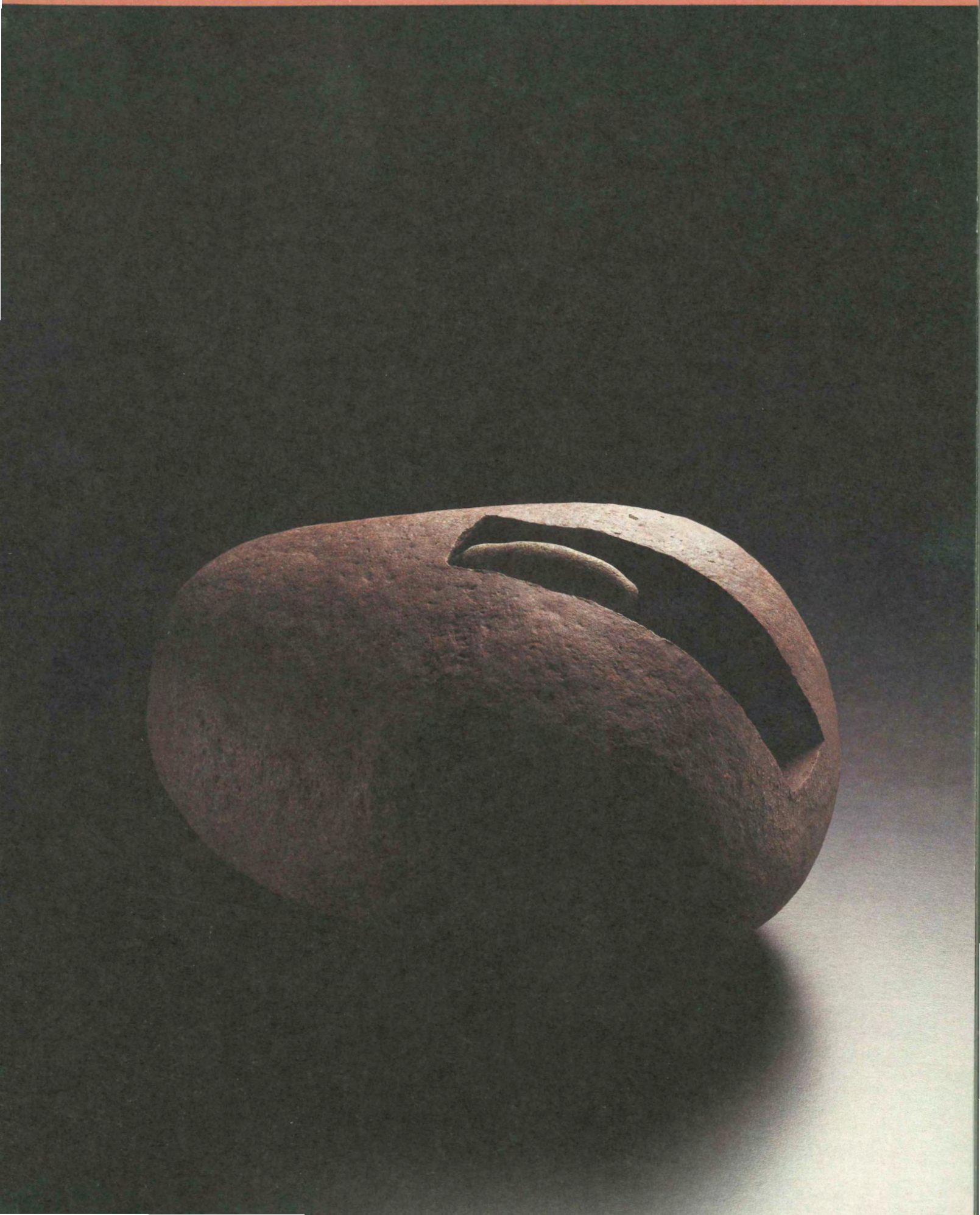
AMERICAN CERAMICS 2/4



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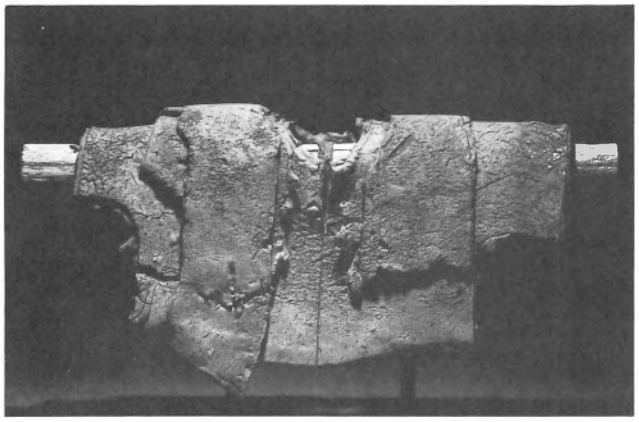

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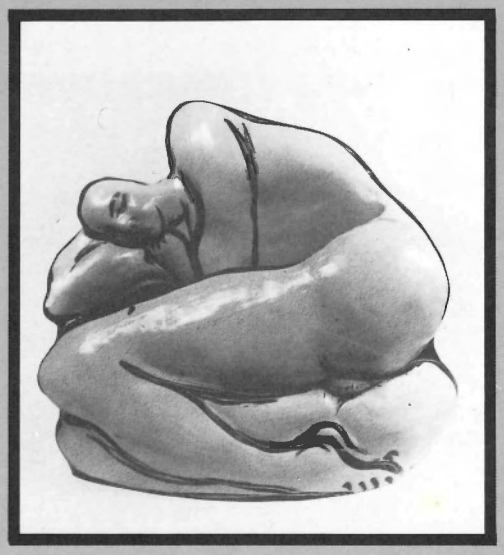
A midnight midnight, when I'll strip
To my diminished self, and wading in,
Yield to the suck of sand between my toes,
To the swirl that laps against my shin,
Indifferently seeking; feel the wind
That, scentless, blows to me from anywhere,
Indifferently tender; know the tide
Swell up --so wombs swell--then
Slide back, swell up again,
Its spray no longer glinting in that dark,
Indifferently washing at my flesh;
Then quailing feel
The firm preemption of the undertow
Indifferently grasp me, levering
The knees to buckle under as
The wide enormous combers wallowing
And whelming, drag me down,
Indifferently urgent, out of time
As even darkness is annulled
And blindness blinded, and
Indifferently cancelled is my voice
That whispers up to nothing as the whole
Enormous warp of water swings me out:

I have struck my fist upon this roiling ocean
And made it ring like bronze.

Maurice English



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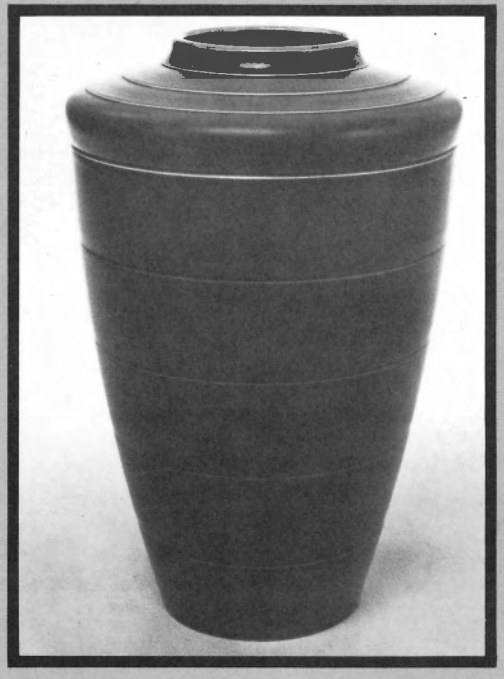
March : Beatrice Wood:
Retrospective 1917-1984



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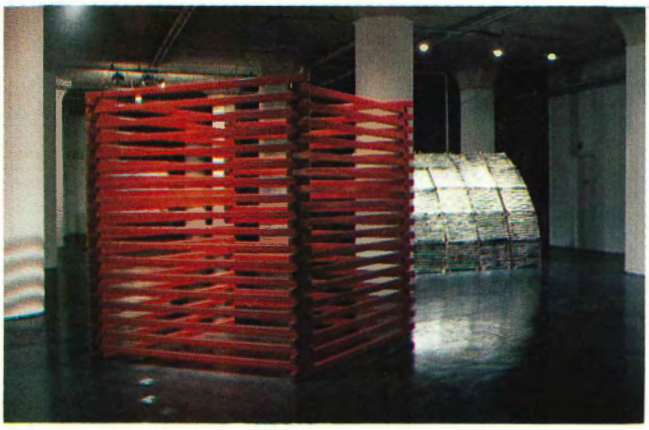
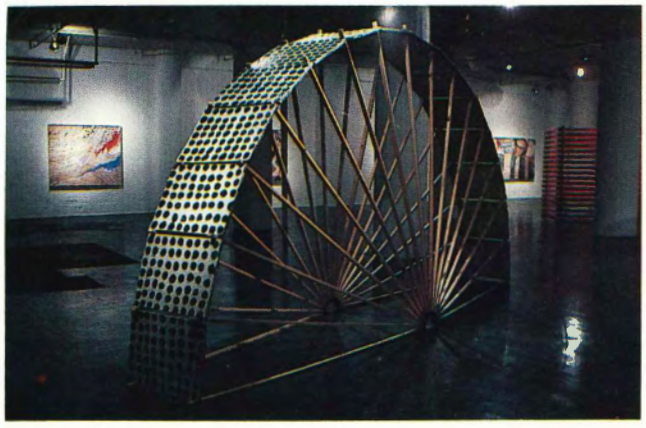

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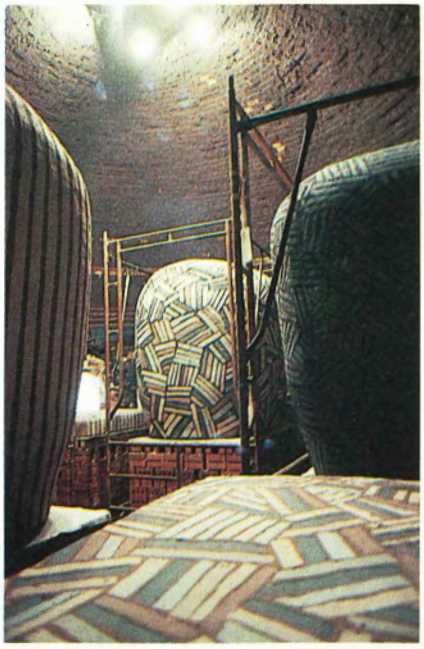
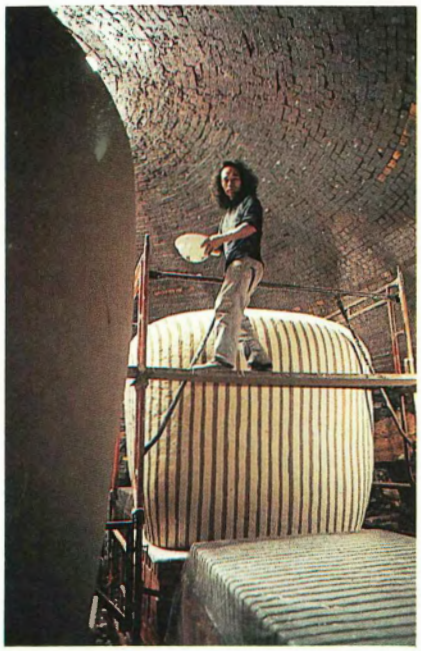
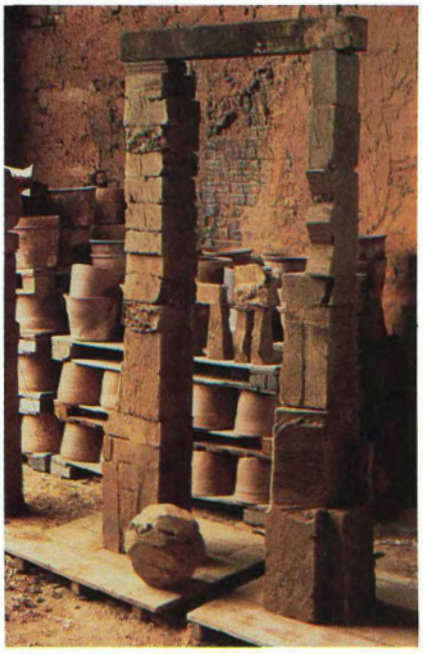




Betty Woodman-Terracotta Facade



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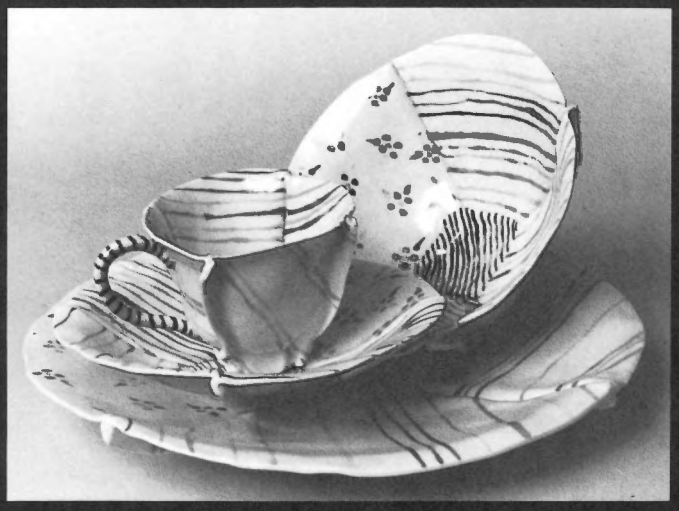
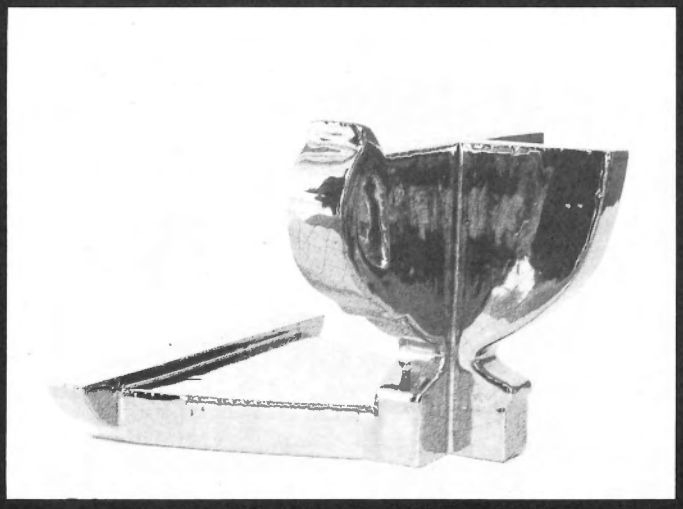


Dishes, 1983 30 cm. d.

FOULEM, LÉOPOLD L.



Cup and Saucer, 1982 11.3 cm. h., x 16.8 cm. w., x 16.5 cm. d.

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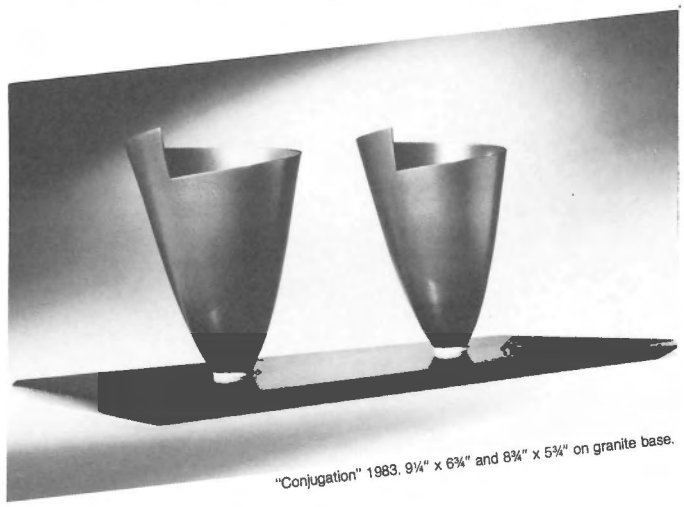

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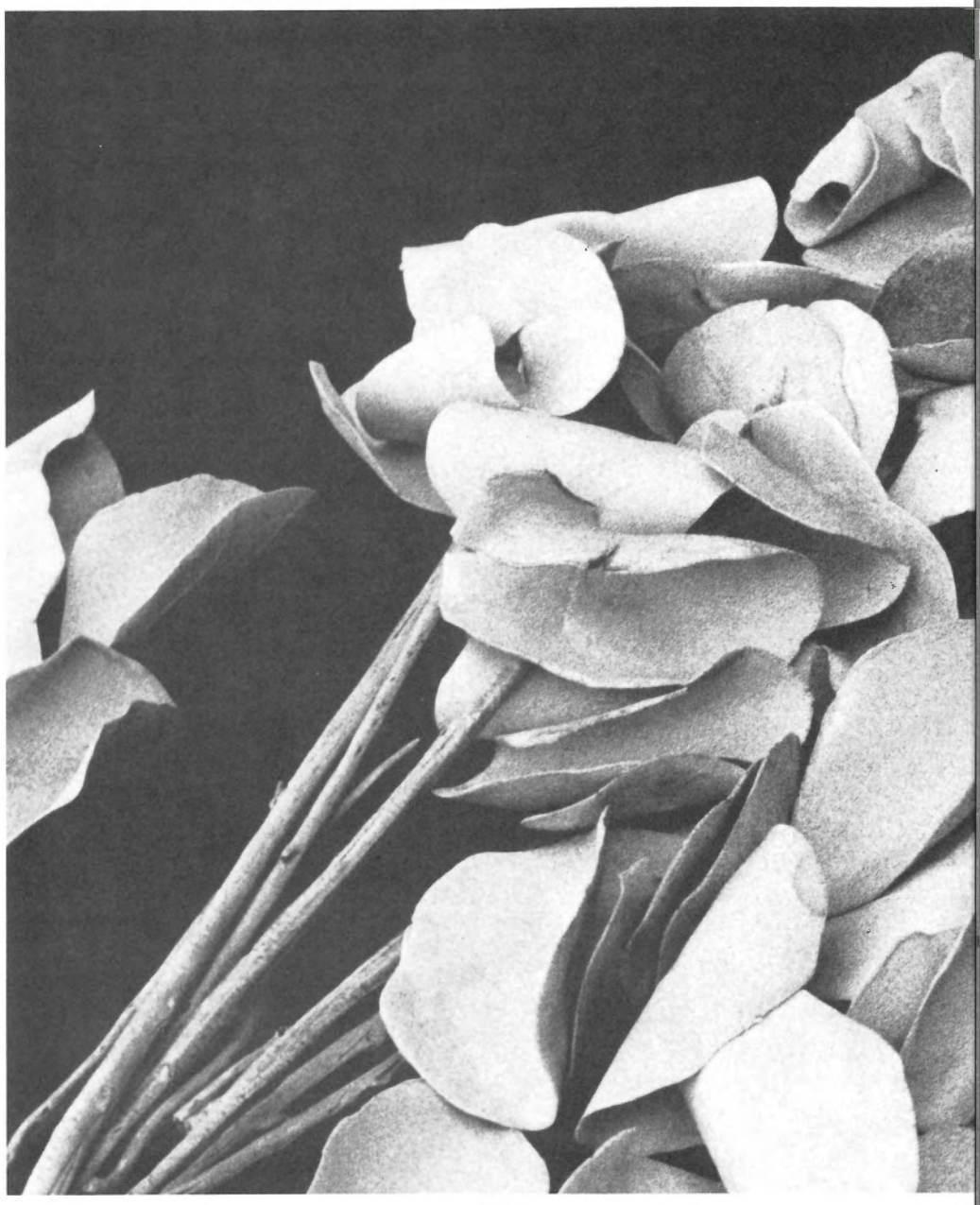
Linda Kramer

Janet Koplos



Janet Koplos writes frequently for American Ceramics. *She recently moved from Illinois to Atlanta, Georgia.*

Detail of Petals, Sticks, Bones, Stones *(1977), 10′ x 20′ (3 x 6m).*

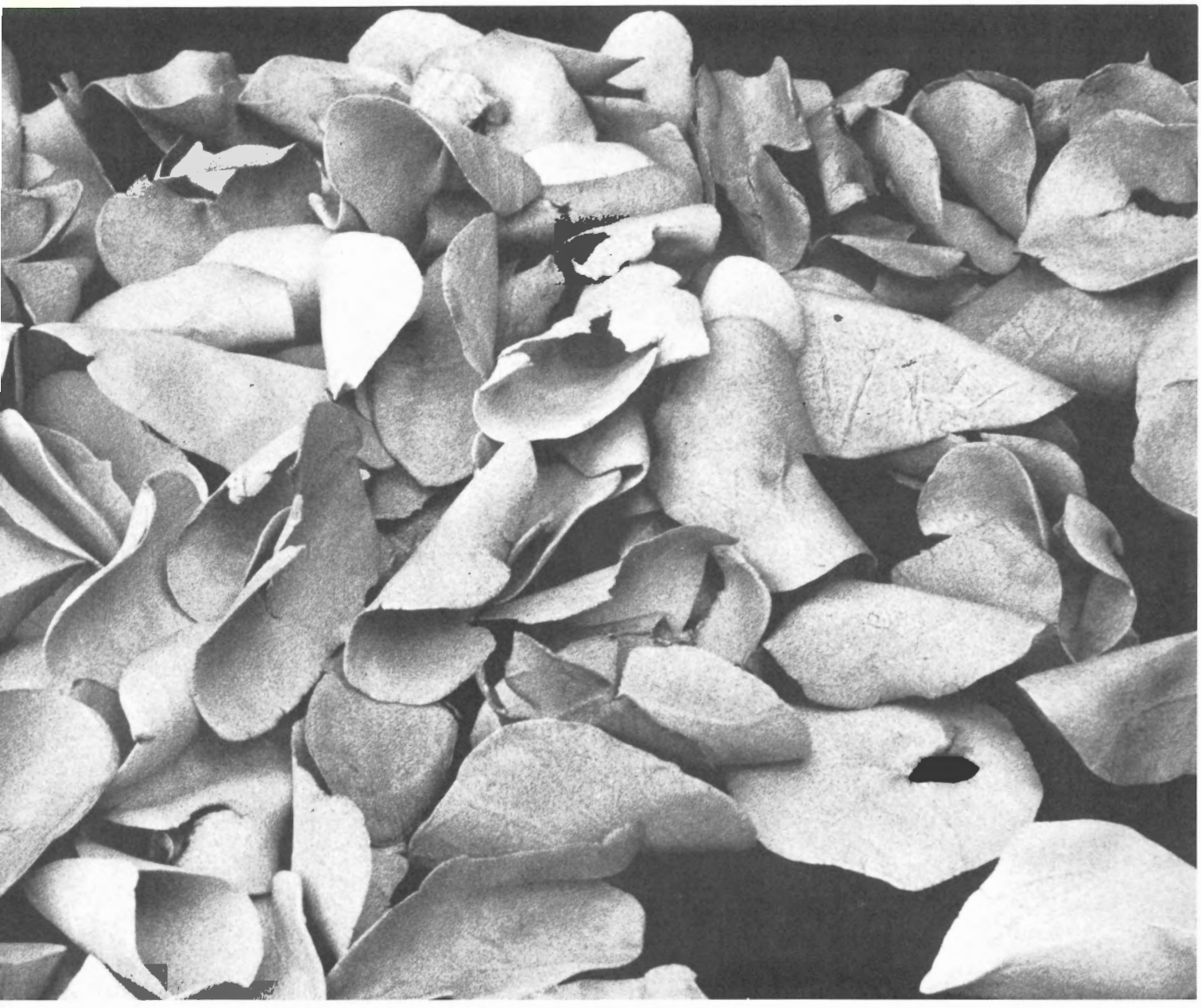
Linda Kramer's ceramic artworks are surprising in scale, in form, in color, and in content. While they take advantage of clay's material qualities, they do not address material nature, technique, vessel format, or ceramic history as their subject matter, and so exist outside those traditions.

Scale is important to Kramer, and she speaks of her works first in terms of measurement: nine-by-five feet, twenty-eight-by-eight feet, ten-by-twenty feet. She refers secondly to the time spans they suggest and their sources of energy and emotion. And thirdly, she speaks in the context of action—not the action of handforming the ceramic parts, but the action of arranging those parts on a platform that frames and supports them. Kramer calls the platforms her canvas, and the ceramic elements her "three-dimensional brush strokes."

That metaphor is a clue to the mix of approaches that makes her work unique: Kramer's undergraduate background at Scripps College was in watercolor and drawing, and her M.F.A. (recently completed at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) is in sculpture. Since 1972 she has worked in clay.

Early works consisted of objects with intense emotional meanings often related to destruction, such as burning houses. By 1977, although her subject was ostensibly the same, her tone had softened. That year her group of eight-inch porcelain chairs, with a china-painted rose in the process of disintegration, was awarded the Eisendrath Prize in the "Chicago and Vicinity" painting and sculpture exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Carrying on the theme of decay, in that same year Kramer created *Petals, Sticks, Stones and Bones,* a "river" thirty feet long and from two to ten feet wide shown on the floor of Artemisia Gallery. In the fall of



1982, that work was installed at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, but this time on the slightly raised platform that has become her favored presentational device. The piece comprises several hundred real-scale porcelain objects scattered across the ten-by-twenty-foot platform, as if they had been dropped by a receding tide or blown about by aimless eddies of wind. The objects of greater weight (stones and bones) accumulate toward one end of this "river." While the overall, distant impression of the piece is of random accretion, there is also the implication of order, the application of intelligence or purpose. Up close, the objects assert their separateness, and the viewer realizes that this is not a natural occurrence but one of thoughtful deliberation. The porcelain, china-painted and unglazed, has a soft, misty character. While still focusing on disintegration and decay, this piece lacks the hurtful intensity of earlier work and seems more resolved, tempered, more accepting of the passage of time and of inevitable change.

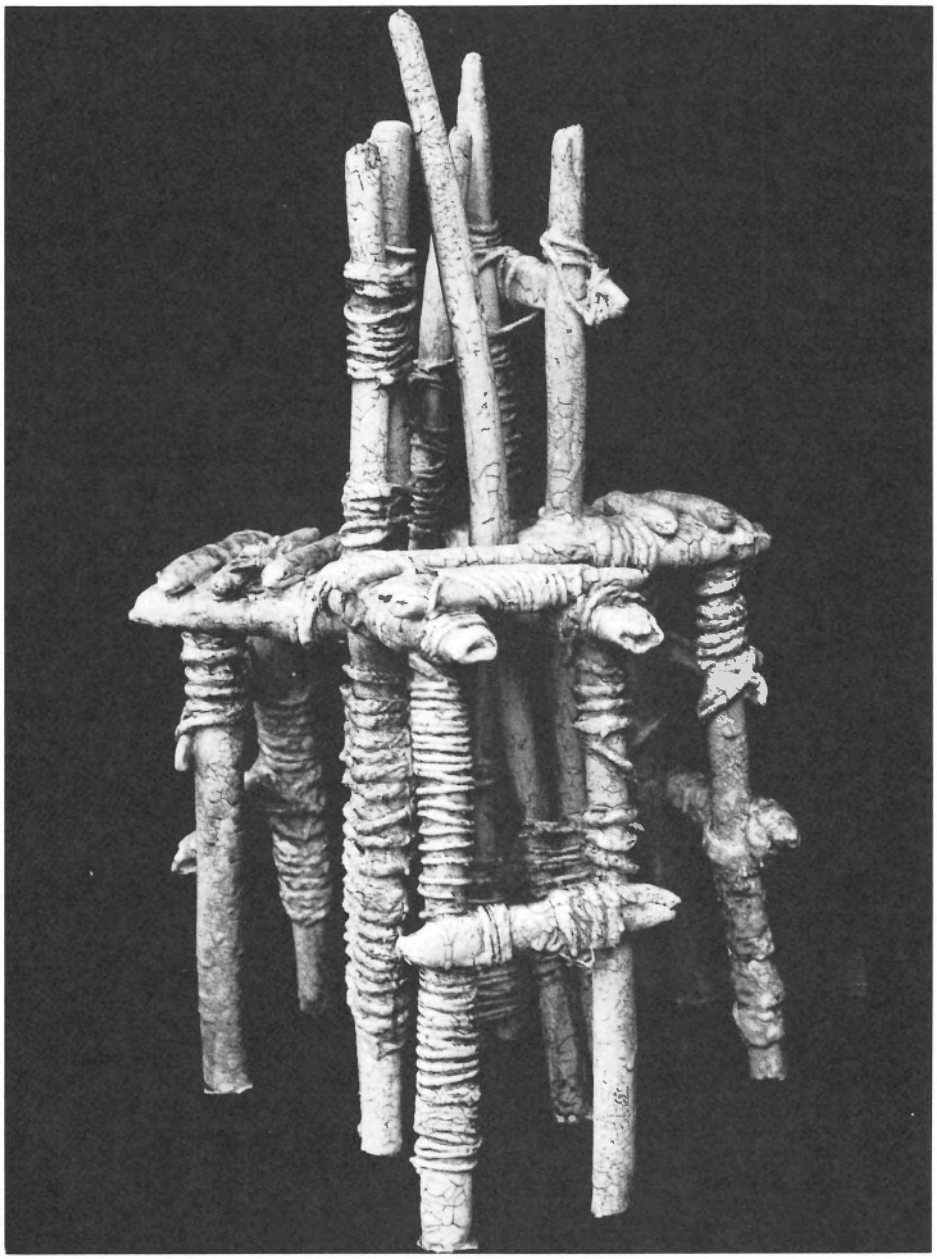
Kramer describes a transition in her work from personal focus to what could be described as a cultural focus; from a "negative energy source" to a new source of positive energy which she discovered within herself. It is a process of personal growth that radiated outward, connecting with other people, other cultures, other times. A prime example is *Graffiti Artifacts,* a 1980 piece which was an awardwinner at that year's "Chicago and Vicinity" show. It consists of a nine-by-five-foot platform covered with terra-cotta pots and shards. This work resulted from Kramer's response to ancient Indian caves in New Mexico, which had been marked with contemporary graffiti. Her first reaction was dismay, "but all of a sudden it hit me how wonderful and beautiful that was—one culture layering itself upon another." In her studio, she chose to use traditional terra-cotta pot forms to represent the Indian culture. They were wheel thrown by her friend Mary Seyfarth because Kramer does not throw. Kramer cracked them and glued them back together and carved them with graffiti that she had been collecting off bathroom walls for years, including graffiti about sex, love, women's issues, and the like. She is particularly fascinated by the mental jump that one must make to understand *Graffiti Artifacts,* the temporal leap from ancient Indian to contemporary times. One might decry the insensitivity of contemporary culture, obliterating the earlier, but once again Kramer's presentation of the work provides a subtle subtext: The multiple objects and fragments are not carelessly dumped on the platform, but are layed out deliberately to suggest the human impulse to order. This positive suggestion mitigates the destructiveness of the graffiti "carved

Three Chairs Bound Back to Back *(1978), 21" (53.3 cm) high. Collection Bonnie Katz, Chicago.*

Flying Chair *(1980), 22" (55.8 cm) high. Collection Ruth Horwich, Chicago.*

Artifact Chair *(1980), 23" (58.4 cm) high.*

Current Energy *(1982), 6' x 8' x 28' (1.5 x 2 x 7 m).*



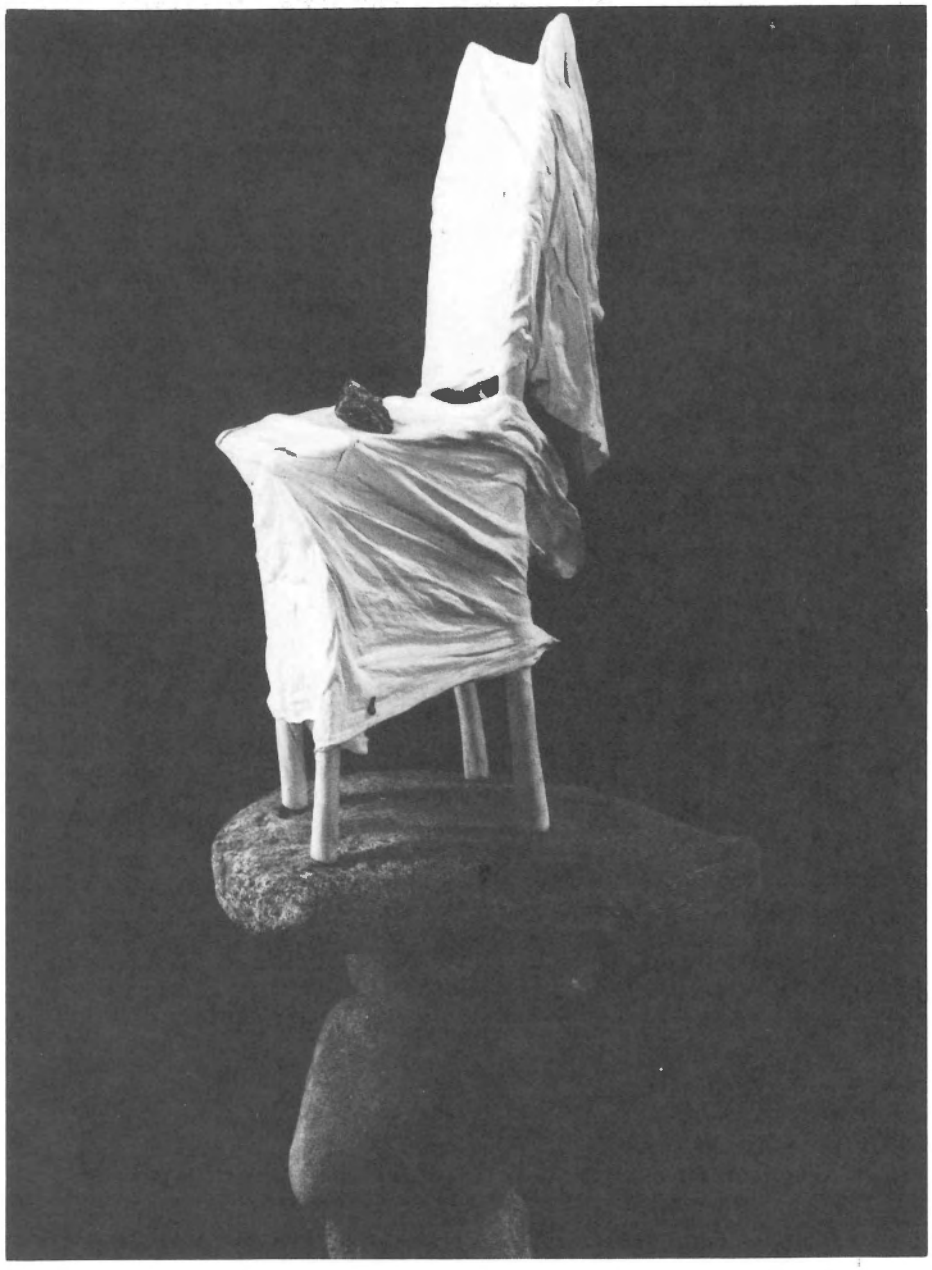
into the flesh of the pots," as Kramer describes it. The mood of this artwork is not defined by the actions of breaking or defacing, but by the artist's more sympathetic observations of human actions.

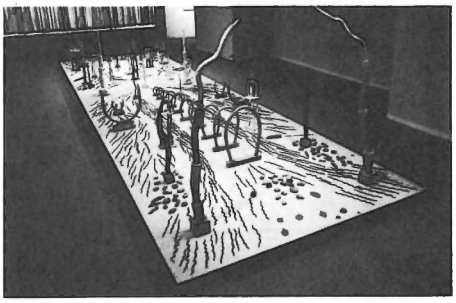
Two 1982 works—*Current Energy* and *Fire and Water*—demonstrate the development in Kramer's art of a forceful energy, expressed through large works made of large elements; through vivid coloring that marks a sharp departure from the watercolorlike pastels of *Petals, Sticks, Stones and Bones,* or terra-cotta solemnity of *Graffiti Artifacts.*

Current Energy, eight-by-twenty-eight feet, employs inks and low-fire glazes on white talc, resulting in intense color. "This piece refers to energy on three or four different levels," Kramer explains. "There's the water current, a psychic current, and there's magnetic field current, and then current in the play on words, meaning 'contemporary, now.'"

But identity is loose in Kramer's pieces: Some forms look Egyptian, others are "little Brancusis," and others "radiation rocks" because of their glowing colors. One part of the artwork incorporates shapes that refer to ancient cultures, while another evokes twentieth-century artworks. The great number of parts, and their varied and occasionally inexplicable forms, sets up a visual rhythm that communicates energy, animation, and intensity.

In *Fire and Water,* form communicates less specifically than color. Both the fire and the water are represented by similar shapes, which Kramer refers to as "flicks." In another work, she used precisely the same form to represent grass. Size, color, and context identify the idea. The form is just a fragment, an impression sufficient to suggest her meaning. In *Fire and Water,* Kramer represents basic elements through





primary colors, although "it rather gave me a headache because I thought it might look too obvious." The platform base was a "wonderful, intense yellow," the water blue and the fire red. Put together "the whole thing just glowed. The glazed flames were very shiny and flickery. The inked parts catch a totally different light . . . there's a tremendous amount of painterly surface quality in the parts."

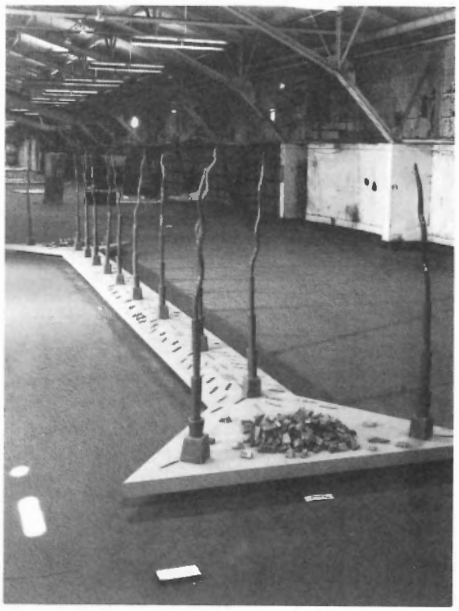
Kramer uses color to create tension in the work. Colors mix in the viewer's retina, creating a more active, participatory color effect than if the artist had mixed and blended color in each individual element. The effect can be pointillist, each piece striking the eye like a brush stroke. Kramer speaks of wanting the color "to vibrate right off the platform and hit the walls and come back again!"

The number of pieces also allows her to create environmental effects. Because of their scale and multiplicity of elements, her artworks ask to be viewed from different perspectives. They can, of course, have a forced viewpoint; every photograph of the work inevitably provides one. But the actual experience of the work is one of process and change. *Current Energy,* designed to fit a given display space, directs the viewer's approach and movement. Entering the space at one of the short ends of the work, one looks down its dense, foreshortened length. Walking down either side, one finds the parts opening up; their spatial relationships shift, and the appearance of the work and the mood it creates alter drastically, from a tense compression to a lyrical openness and flow. Neither aspect is "right," but together constitute the mood of *Current Energy.*

Vertical scale also has impact. The fragments in *Petals, Sticks, Stones and Bones* were only a few inches high, consistent with the quiet, soft mood of the

Graffiti Artifacts *(1980), 9′ x 5′ (2.25 x 1.25 m).*

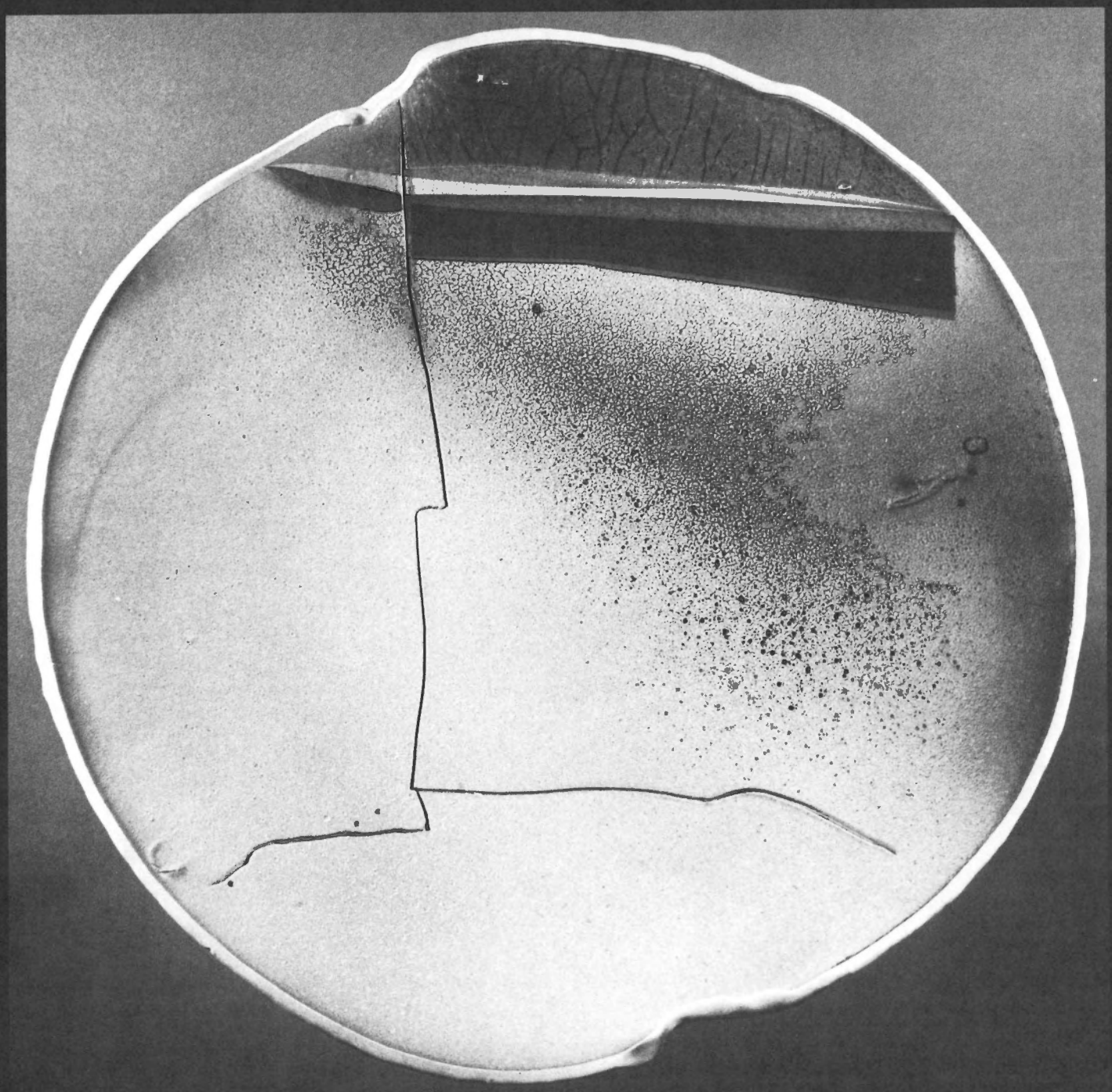
Energy Field *(1983), 6′ x 2′ x 38′ (1.5 x 0.5 x 9.5 m). Photo: William H. Bengston.*



piece. In *Current Energy* and *Fire and Water,* the flowing water shapes are also relatively flat. But both these works also use tall, thrusting forms as high as six feet. The narrow, vertical movement of these sinuous parts contributes to the sense of flickering, pulsing energy, with a threatening undercurrent in both pieces. One does not just look down at these artworks, but also up, through, and around their dominating, enveloping presences.

In her most recent piece, *Energy Field,* these effects are pushed still further. This is the longest work—thirty-eight feet—and the tallest—about eight feet. Flames and radiation rocks are repeated, along with the general hot color scheme, only this time on an intensely turquoise blue base. The sense of compression is emphasized in the long perspective; varied curves of the glistening red surfaces catch the light differently, emphasizing their handbuilt individuality. Firelike in their color and form, they also suggest undulating appendages, like the multiarmed Hindu diety. Compression—potential energy—is conveyed by the number and graduated spacing of these vertical elements and by the telescoped elements, beginning with the squarish rocklike base that stabilizes the attentuated, flagellating length. The movement from base to tip is projective or ejaculative, a release of energy that may explain why Kramer describes this work as being "about passion."

It is characteristic of Kramer's work to communicate such sensuousness and intensity with formality and order. The same kind of contradiction is implicit in the contrast between emotional content and cultural allusion. The coexistence of opposing aspects—nature and culture, contemporary and ancient, emotional and formal—give Kramer's works their surprising tenor.



Robert McGowan

John A. Whisler

Untitled (For Andrea, I think) *(1982), 20″ (50 cm) diameter. Photo: Truusy Lory.*

Robert McGowan studied art at Memphis State and at The Memphis Academy of Arts. In 1973 he received a M.F.A. degree with a major in ceramics from Cranbrook Academy of Art. McGowan also has a Master of Library Science degree from The University of Mississippi, and has worked as an art librarian at the Memphis Public Library. He has taught at The Memphis Academy of Arts and at Memphis State University but, since early in 1980, has devoted himself exclusively to his own studio work.
Together with his wife Annie, McGowan recently completed the repair and remodeling of an old building in downtown Memphis for use as residence and studio space—a project which necessitated a six-month interruption in his work. He has now returned to his work, which reflects some of the changes mentioned in this interview.
McGowan's work is represented primarily by Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, New York, where his December 1982 solo exhibition sold out before opening. Hadler/Rodriguez has scheduled an exhibition of his new work for the spring of 1984.
The following conversation is condensed from talks that took place in July of 1982 in McGowan's studio.

JOHN WHISLER You've been working with this particular form for three or four years now. There is change, but it's gradual. Do you find it difficult to maintain enthusiasm within these fairly strict boundaries you seem to have set?
ROBERT McGOWAN Frankly, I'm not sure it's a matter of enthusiasm. The experience probably has more to do with ordinary hard work. I never have enjoyed *doing* art—it's having *done* a piece that succeeds—that's where the payoff is for me, and then being able to move on from there.
And you're right that change is slow. I like to know exactly what I'm doing before moving away from a particular configuration. If you move too fast, you probably abandon something before it's fully developed. I prefer to refine until I'm so closely involved that change occurs almost naturally out of what exists already. I don't like skipping steps. I get lost that way, and the work can seem contrived because of that.
JW I've watched your work develop for several years, and I know that you seem to spend most of your life in the studio. Do you feel there's any danger in such an unrelaxed involvement?
RM No, it's not quite all that "unrelaxed." I'm not a recluse. As far as my work is concerned, I find I don't need to get out of the studio. Some people require external visual experience to bring to their work; others don't. I'm in the latter group. My work seems to occupy a fairly separate place in my life and isn't much affected by external things. It develops out of itself, I think.
JW It surprises me, though, that your nose-to-the-grindstone kind of approach to your work produces objects that are so expansive visually—all that big space, for example.
RM But expansiveness can be an intellectual thing, don't you agree? You don't have to see a big sky to know that you want in your work a feeling of space you can walk into. That's in your head. That's where it is before you take it and put it into the work. The same goes for everything else in the work. It doesn't come from things I see or from things that happen out of the studio in any direct way that I'm aware of.
JW What about quantity? I know you fire your kiln very frequently, often twice a day.
RM I'd say I do at least ten firings per week, and I get between two and four pieces a month. It depends on a lot of factors. I don't like to count on more than two, or *maybe* three. Naturally, there are times when you can go a few weeks with nothing that works. That's frustrating. Of course, it goes the other way sometimes, too. But you have to realize that every piece is getting close to fifteen firings, and they need a lot of work between firings. And I do discard some work, too. So it's just a very long process, and I can't do it any faster. But that's another reason I'm in the studio a lot—it takes that time.
JW You don't like to discuss technique, do you? Why is that?
RM Mainly because I simply can't get interested in talking about it at any length. It's a lot of work getting things technically right in the studio. It's painstaking and sometimes frustrating. Talking about it is just as frustrating. You get tired of talking about something that simply is not the main issue.
JW What is the main issue?
RM I hope you realize what a huge, huge question that is.
JW Can I make it easier? Why are you doing art? As you say, it's a lot of work.
RM That's just as big, but I do think about it a lot. I'm sorry to sound dramatic, but I have to be honest: I think it really has a lot to do with the impermanence of one's existence. All you can do is this: If you can bring an object into existence with a vitality that has developed out of you, then you've projected yourself a bit out of that biological trap.[1] I'd like to insist that this isn't neurotic; it's just very, very fundamental to motivation. Also, I do art because I'd rather do art than be a librarian or teach, which I've also done.
JW How do you know when you have a piece that works, that has that vitality you mention?
RM There are some pieces that I feel extremely close to, and many others work well enough to be important to me. But actually, it's not easy to tell. It takes time—sometimes months. You're looking for something that you don't understand fully, *making* answers that didn't exist for you before. It's often difficult to recognize them when you do find them. When possible, I like to keep certain pieces around for at least a few months, and even then I can make mistakes in assessing them. It's all very vague. Here's a particularly interesting thing: Sometimes I'll have a piece that I have a special interest in, but I might not know at first whether it's a failure or a success. The thing is that there is probably something new to me about it. But you can't quickly or easily assess the unfamiliar, so it might take weeks or months before you know whether the change you've made is a dead end and possibly a real failure. Or whether it's a new little part of the answers you're looking for. I find this fascinating.
JW The evolution of the work, the mental process involved, that's what you're talking about?
RM Mental, psychological, emotional process, yes. That, in itself, interests me very much. I do not understand it. I wouldn't claim that. But it fascinates me—why you proceed along a certain direction, why you choose to go one way or another. Why, of all the ways that could exist, is my work exactly the way it is? I don't think anyone can truly, truly explain these things, but I do seriously believe that, asking yourself about it is indispensable. The least you can do is have the questions, if not the answers.
JW You seem intent on precision in your attitude toward your work and in your work itself—as if you don't want to falter, as if losing direction frightens you.
RM Losing direction does scare me. Most artists go through very tough times before finding a direction they have confidence in. It would throw me pretty badly if I woke up one morning and didn't know how to work any more. I had that kind of experience some years ago, and it's an awful, desperate kind of feeling.
But of course, I do falter—more, in fact, than I don't falter. If you don't blow it occasionally, it just means you're not taking the necessary risks that ultimately get you from one place to another. Not technical risks, but risks in making decisions when you're uncertain.
As far as precision is concerned, it's just the nature of my work. It's fundamental to it, in fact. I do like to have precise control of how I'm proceeding—and technically, too. Control is something I know I need, so I don't fight that. I just try to have as much of it as I can.
JW Let's talk about the work itself, then. Janet Koplos has said that your work cannot be discussed in painting terms because you've retained this round concavity, bringing other things into play.[2] How do you feel about the relationship of your work to painting?
RM She's absolutely right, of course. These things aren't painting, that's all.
JW I think you feel strongly about this issue.
RM Yes, I do. I don't know why there is such eagerness to see *any* surface as a painting, or in painting terms. Of course, it's an

easy temptation when it's mainly surface you're seeing and, in art, surfaces usually have been paintings. I don't deny my surface orientation, and I don't deny that I've responded very strongly to painting. I do have a very definite two-dimensional orientation. But I think it is clear that I'm a ceramist, and I prefer that my work be seen largely, if not exclusively, in ceramics terms. No, not exclusively. That wouldn't be fair or even desirable. But even if I were doing flat ceramic things—and I think I might be eventually—they'd still be ceramic, notwithstanding their being flat. Painting should not have an exclusivity on flatness or on surface. Lots of paintings aren't flat. So are they not paintings any more? In many ways, you just have to take an object on its own terms. If it's strong at all, you can do that.

JW Did you say you might eventually be doing "flat things?" Do you then expect a big change in your work?

RM Not immediately, no. But I think it could happen. I've been giving it some thought. It would be logical, I think, for me to go that way. It shouldn't surprise anyone.

JW You're talking about a change in direction?

RM Absolutely not. I'm talking about a change in *format;* the basic direction would not change. That's a very important distinction to make. I think of direction as running very deep and constant. Form is less basic and changes when necessary to clarify direction. Form itself is comparatively superficial, really. It's there only to make your direction visible, like a conduit to or from something more basic.

JW Here's another interesting little issue: what about vesselness in relation to your work?

RM Well, I can answer that easily by saying that I simply am not dealing at all with the vessel. I came to the work I'm doing now from an earlier involvement with the vessel, and I have a great respect for what might be called the vessel aesthetic. But you have to realize, and this is very important, that the concept and aesthetics of the vessel have to do with much, much more than mere container form. You can throw a rudimentary pot that's clearly a pot. Years later, after practice, they might be technically perfect. You can arrive at this level of competence without ever dealing with the important conceptual and aesthetic issues involved in the idea of the vessel.

And the reverse is true, too. What I am doing is using a form that is derived from the vessel. But I am just using this form. I am not concerned with any of the more important vessel issues. I am, therefore, not actually concerned with vesselness. It's crystal clear to me. Somthing round and concave doesn't necessarily have to be a vessel. You do some abstracting, separating form from the concepts customarily associated with it.

JW But isn't that asking too much? How reasonable is it to expect people to see your work and not think of vessels?

RM I've been surprised, frankly, but very gratified that most people actually do stop short of thinking of my work as vessels. I guess some people think they're paintings. The truth is that they are neither. My work is mainly surface and is on the wall, so it's painting. It's round and concave, so it's vessel. It's just not that simple—not that clean and neat, you know.

JW Does that ambiguity bother you?

RM There is some ambiguity, but no, it does not bother me. What we're talking about is labels, categories into which you can try to place a work of art. I mentioned earlier that you eventually have to take a work *on its own terms.* Beneath the question of whether a work is a vessel, a painting, a sculpture, or none of these, you have the thing itself, the piece of work, which, finally, is what matters most. The other things do have to be considered, because you must know the territory you're in, yes. But the fences between territories move around all the time. The painting and sculpture camps went through this same kind of problem a while back. I think this kind of thing is really better left to the art scholar or historian, than the artist. Anyway, there are things that can be said in favor of ambiguity.

JW Go on. What things?

RM Well, maybe you don't need too much certainty. The comfort of certainty can stifle. Having some ambiguity—that tension—can be exhilarating. You stay a little bit on the edge between things. I think I like that. Anyway, I've always felt strongly that any kind of certainty is foolish. If you're certain of something, various philosophical or art issues, it probably means that you don't know enough about it to be *un*certain.

JW Back again to the work itself. I'd like to ask you about these bars, always in overlapping groups of two or three, that seem omnipresent in your work.

RM They're always there, yes. Once—and only once so far—there was a double set of them. But otherwise, there's always only the one set. I don't know how much detail you want from me on these bars. They have a fairly long history in the work. At one time I was painting them on paper.

JW Yes, I remember that. I thought you had regressed to kindergarten when you showed me those red and blue lines of watercolor you were doing.

RM That was an important developmental stage, though. Later, those bars showed up on these ceramic surfaces, but they didn't move directly off the paper and onto the clay. On the clay, they developed out of soft, runny areas of glaze against edges. Those areas eventually got very hard-edged and changed to slip, of course.

JW But why their omnipresence?

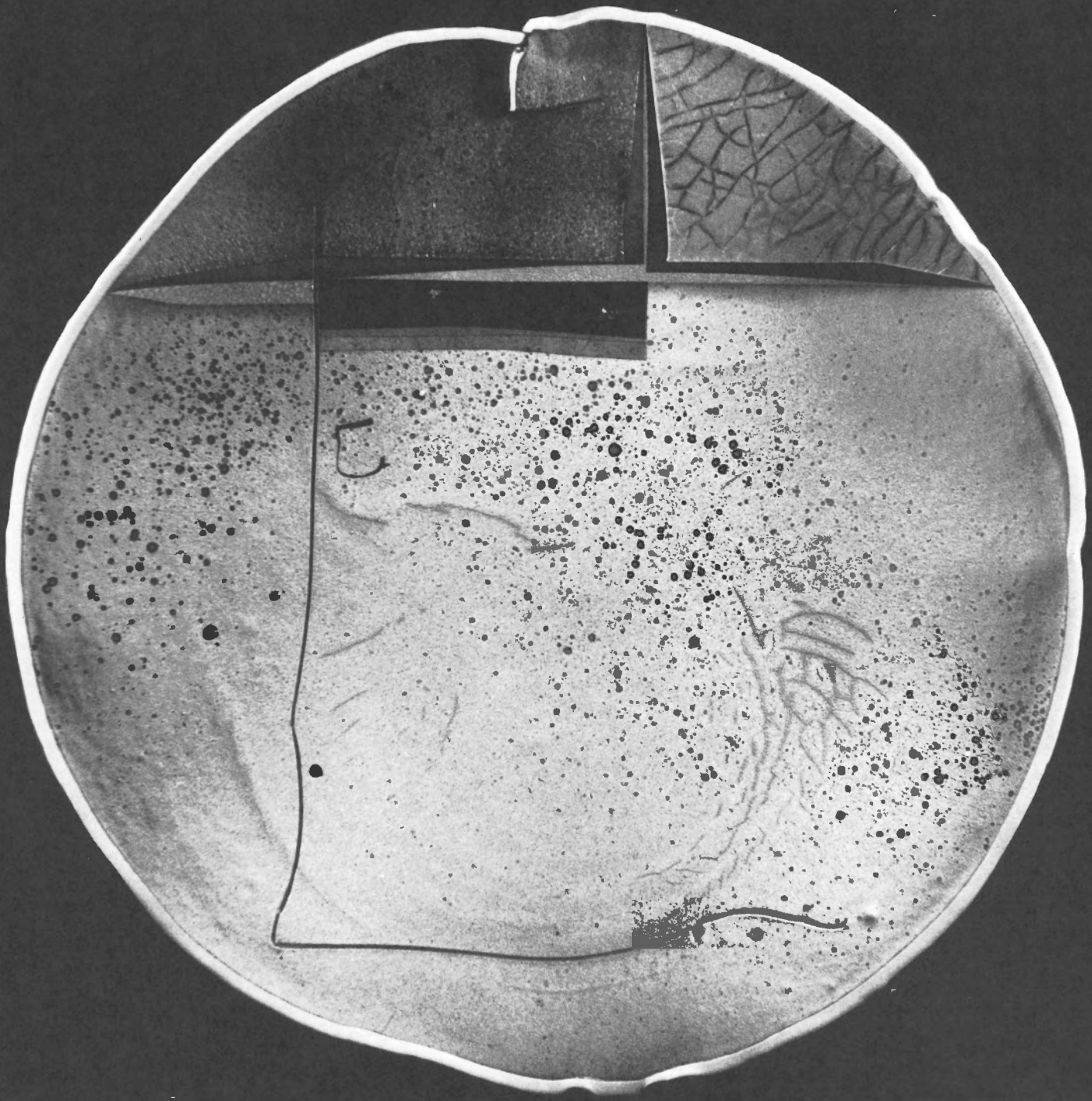
RM They're just a device—or part of a device, maybe—that I depend on as part of the segmentation that occurs on these surfaces, separating a surface into independent parts that have various relationships. "Independent" is the key word there. The bars are just parts of other parts, you know, things that intrude onto a whole, whatever that is. Whether they integrate or not is a major concern. I don't want them to integrate fully. I don't want them to entirely lose their independence in that way. Getting them right there on the edge between integration and separation—that's when they work, and that's when it fascinates me. It can be an extremely delicate problem.

JW But you're talking mainly about the formal results of these bars. I'd like to know more about why you use them.

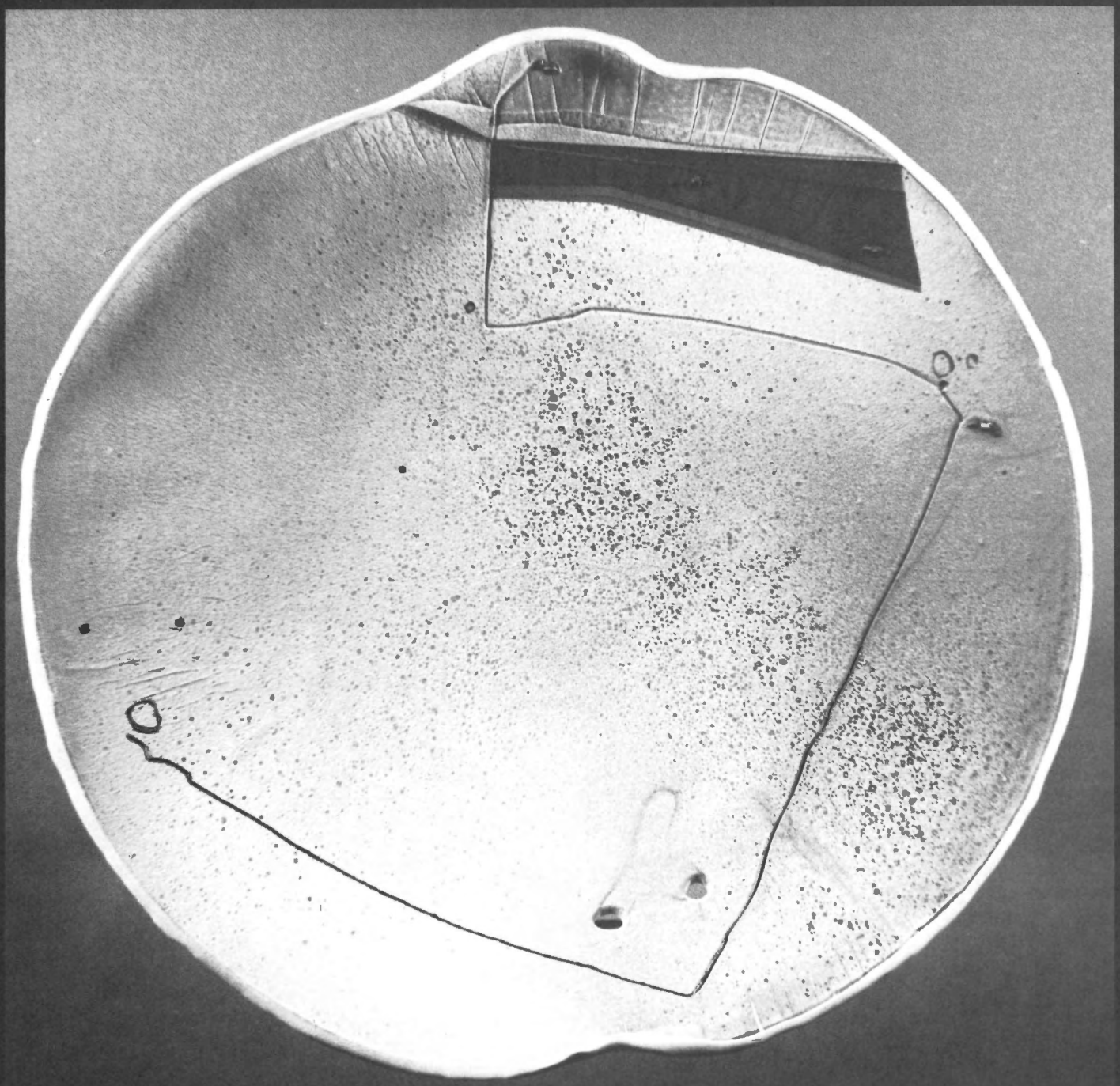
RM Because they continue to be a way to deal with and experience the idea of the edge and the idea of the part. A lot of what I'm doing is toying with the possibility of having an independent part—which, in itself, is a fascinating, self-contradictory notion. Anyway, it is the edge that permits the identity of something as a separate entity. Edge is the place where something begins or ends. The truth is that edge is not a simple matter. For centuries it has been a matter of philosophical inquiry—looking for a way to isolate the place where one entity ends and another begins. I'm interested in the idea of parts. And if parts can be identified separately, then it is their edges that separate them. So I've tried to isolate edges. That can't be done, because if an edge is isolated, then it can be divided, producing other edges. So these little bars, which were originally intended to *be* edges, have multiplied, producing numerous edges crowded against each other. It becomes a little obsessive. To me, it is an important issue. I really do want to know about parts—what a part is, if it can truly exist, and how these parts can relate to one another. It is not merely a formal issue. After all, everything we perceive or hope to know is merely a part of something, isn't it? And if we're looking for ultimate answers, then we must decide about the difference between parts and a whole that might exist in one way or another. I'm not sure I can explain myself any better than this: I simply would like very much to be able to isolate something I can know to be a single entity. It seems to me that this would be a place to begin an understanding of the world. To start with something that is separate, alone, not a part.

JW You speak in very analytical terms about your work. If I had never seen your work, but had only heard you talk about it, I would expect it to be very cold and static. In contrast, your work is usually almost lush, very beautiful to the eye. I think a lot of this has to do with color. I'm puzzled about this seeming dichotomy.

RM I try to restrain myself, keep the reins tight on that because I really don't want too much prettiness, too much lusciousness. I



Untitled (Skinfaxi) *(1982), 20″ (50 cm) diameter. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, New York. Photo: Truusy Lory.*



Untitled (You see my way) *(1982), 20″ (50 cm) diameter. Photo: Truusy Lory. Courtesy Hadler/Rodriguez Galleries, New York.*

Untitled (See backwards. . .) *(1982), 20″ (50 cm) diameter. Photo: Truusy Lory.*

Untitled (Bitch!) *(1981), 20″ (50 cm) diameter. Photo: Truusy Lory. Courtesy Mitsui Gallery, San Francisco.*

don't want that to overwhelm formal concerns, and it's easy to let that happen. My problem is that I'm drawn to the luscious, too, as well as wanting to deal with other visual ideas in a stricter way. This is a constant problem for me—trying not to be absorbed completely in either extreme.

JW You've talked quite a lot about this very issue, about having an "affinity" for these two extremes, the casual against the structured, the sensuous against the formal.

RM Right. It is central to what I do. As I say, it's the *extremes* of these qualities that interest me. Moderation in these areas is what I *don't* want, so they have to coexist somehow, which means you're on a tightrope all the time about it.[3]

JW Your color can be quite intense. It has been said that it is not ceramiclike.

RM There are lots of ceramists using unceramiclike color. The exclusive preoccupation with mottled brown disappeared long ago. Low-fire and all the commercial stains helped make that change. There's no such thing as "ceramiclike" color.

JW You don't feel you're breaking any rules, then?

RM I'm certainly not aware of it. I really don't think so, no. I was once very afraid of color. I thought there were strict rules, so I read a lot about it for a long time. Now I just do what I want with it. I know what it does for me. Color is very potent. You get to the point where you use it like words. You have to be able to just have it to do things *with*. It's not an issue in itself for me.

JW Given the way you deal with a surface, does anyone ever ask you why you aren't painting?

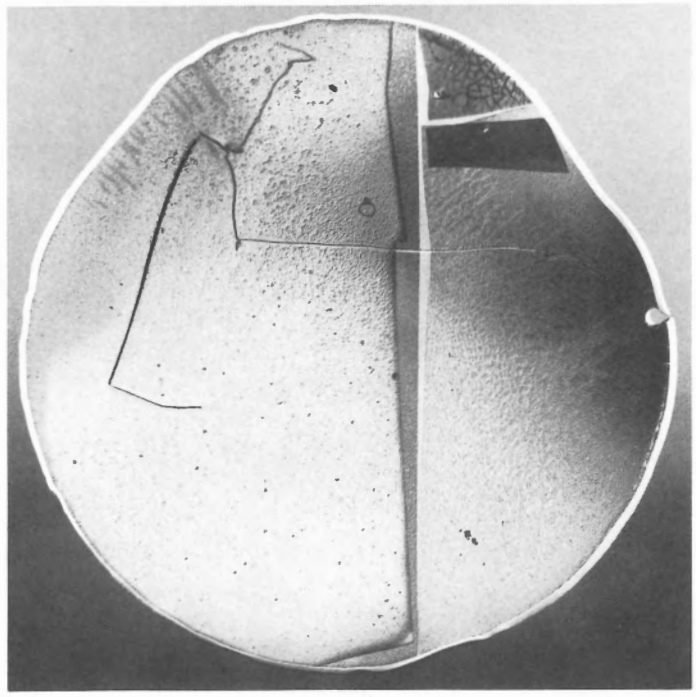
RM It baffles me that no one has asked me that before. Maybe I don't talk to enough people. For one thing, though, I'm not sure I could get the kind of surface qualities I like with paint. I'd like to give it a real tough try, though. Maybe it would turn out to be easier—the ceramic process can be a real nuisance.

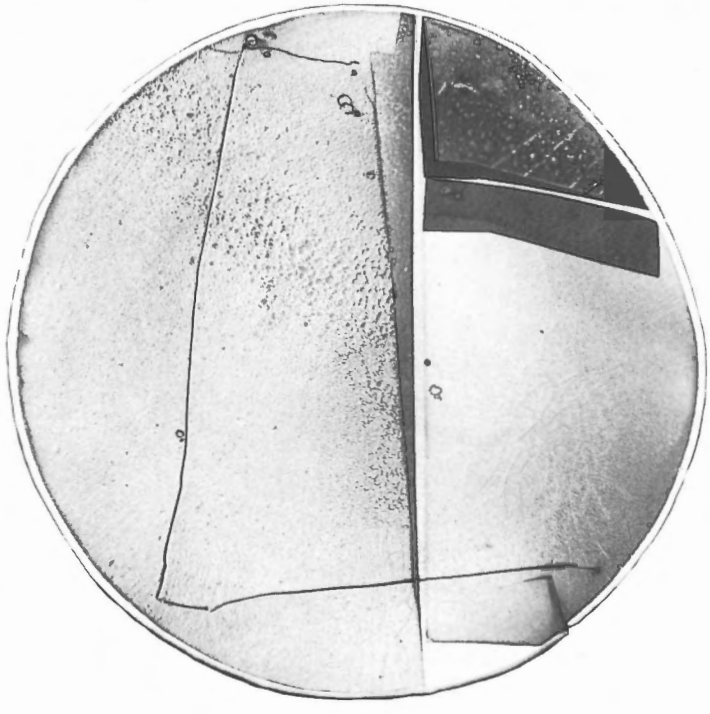
JW You're not definitely committed to ceramics, then?

RM Sure I am, but if I thought there were an easier way to get what I want, I would do it.

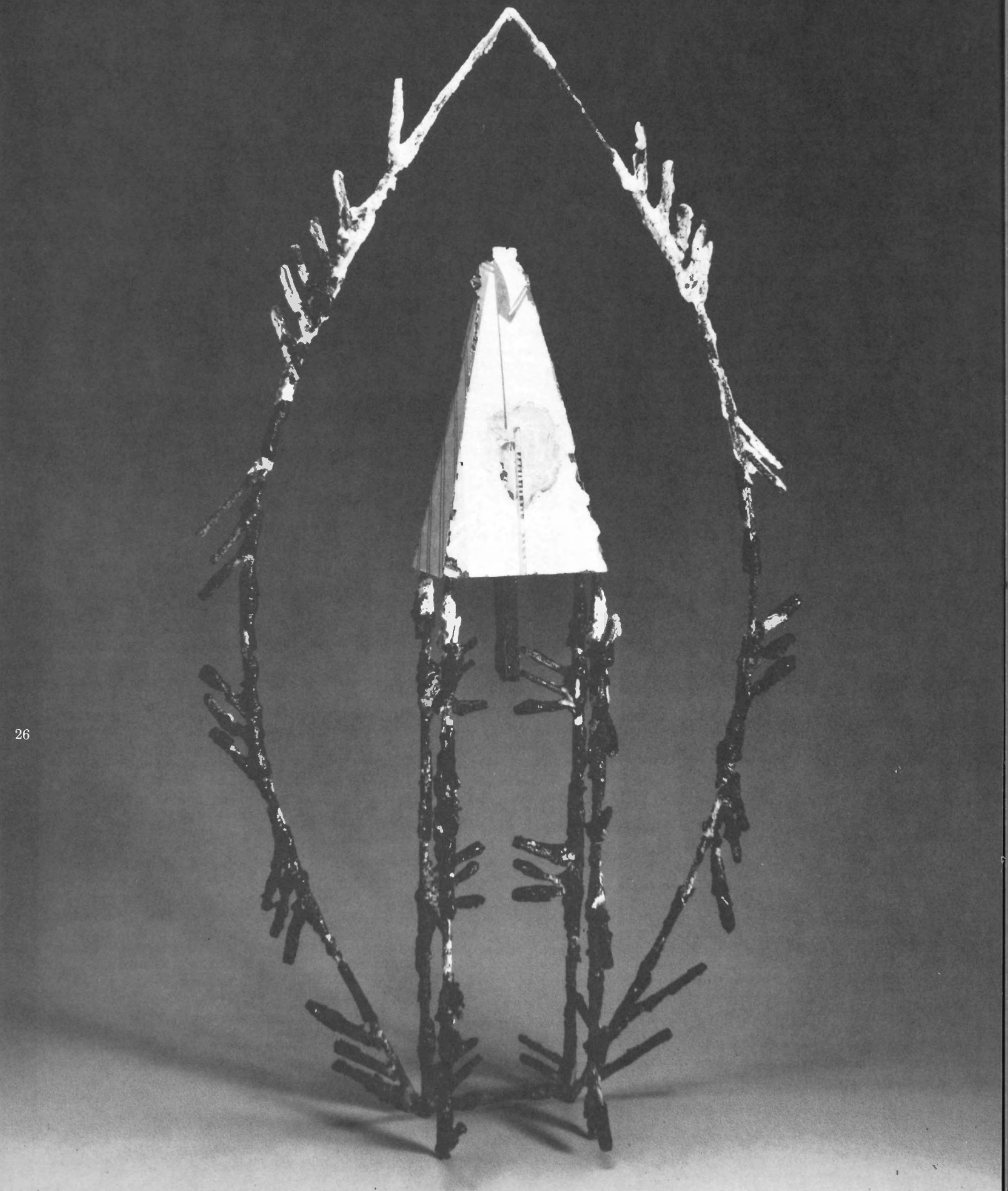
1. McGowan makes reference to Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973) and Otto Rank's *Art and Artist* (New York: Knopf, 1932). Both works study motivation in art, with particular emphasis on the artist's awareness of the inevitability of death and of artistic effort as a means not of transcending death, but of refuting it.
2. Janet Koplos, "Robert McGowan," *American Ceramics* 1/2 (Spring 1982), pp. 44–45.
3. Janet Koplos, "Robert McGowan," *New Art Examiner,* February, 1982, p. 17. Koplos refers to McGowan as a "tightrope walker" and to Voulkos as a "weight-lifter."

John A. Whisler is the coordinator of Fine Arts Services at Booth Library, Eastern Illinois University.





Madonna (1982), 62″ (157.5 cm) high.
Photo: Jerry D. Friedman.



The Ceramic Sculpture of Ron Fondaw

The Medium is the Message

Paula Harper

When I asked Ron Fondaw where he thought he fitted into the history of modern sculpture—rather than the history of modern ceramics—he said he shared some interests with the Minimalists. Minimalist sculptors, beginning in the 1960s, have focussed not only on strong, simple forms, but on exploring the essentials of sculpture itself according to the Modernist dictum, finally defining the irreducible means of sculpture as volume, void, and their relationship. Vanguard artists in all the arts of the twentieth century—painting, sculpture, dance, film, literature, and theatre—have been engaged in this search for the essence of their medium. Fondaw, along with some other young sculptors who work in clay, has been applying this modernist aesthetic to ceramics. His sculptures are about the physical nature of clay, its essential qualities as a material, and also about the connotations and ancient meanings attached to objects made of clay.

"I don't like my things to look like anything but the essence of the material," says Fondaw, "which I see as mass, weight, and texture." Having defined these qualities of clay, Fondaw deftly proceeds to turn them upside down and inside out, literally and figuratively. In *Uratt,* for example, Fondaw challenges the conventional conceptions of all three qualities. First of all, he creates an open, linear form by using steel rods. "One of the things they say you can't do with clay," Fondaw says, "is make a linear element, because clay has no tensile strength. It has tremendous compressive strength—you can't crush a brick easily—but no tensile strength. I'm trying to defy those rules. So I use steel, coating it with Egyptian paste." As Fondaw tests the concept of mass by counterposing an open, linear form, he probes the quality of weight with an unexpected positioning of mass. The open, triangular form of *Uratt* is mirrored by a solid, terra-cotta shape suspended in space. "We expect clay to be massive," he says, "and we expect mass to be in a certain relationship to the earth, that is, right on it. So to suspend it in the air—like a big woman on high heels—is unexpected." In looking at his sculpture, our familiar experience of gravity is attenuated; we share the world with an object that seems to teeter on the edge of its possibilities.

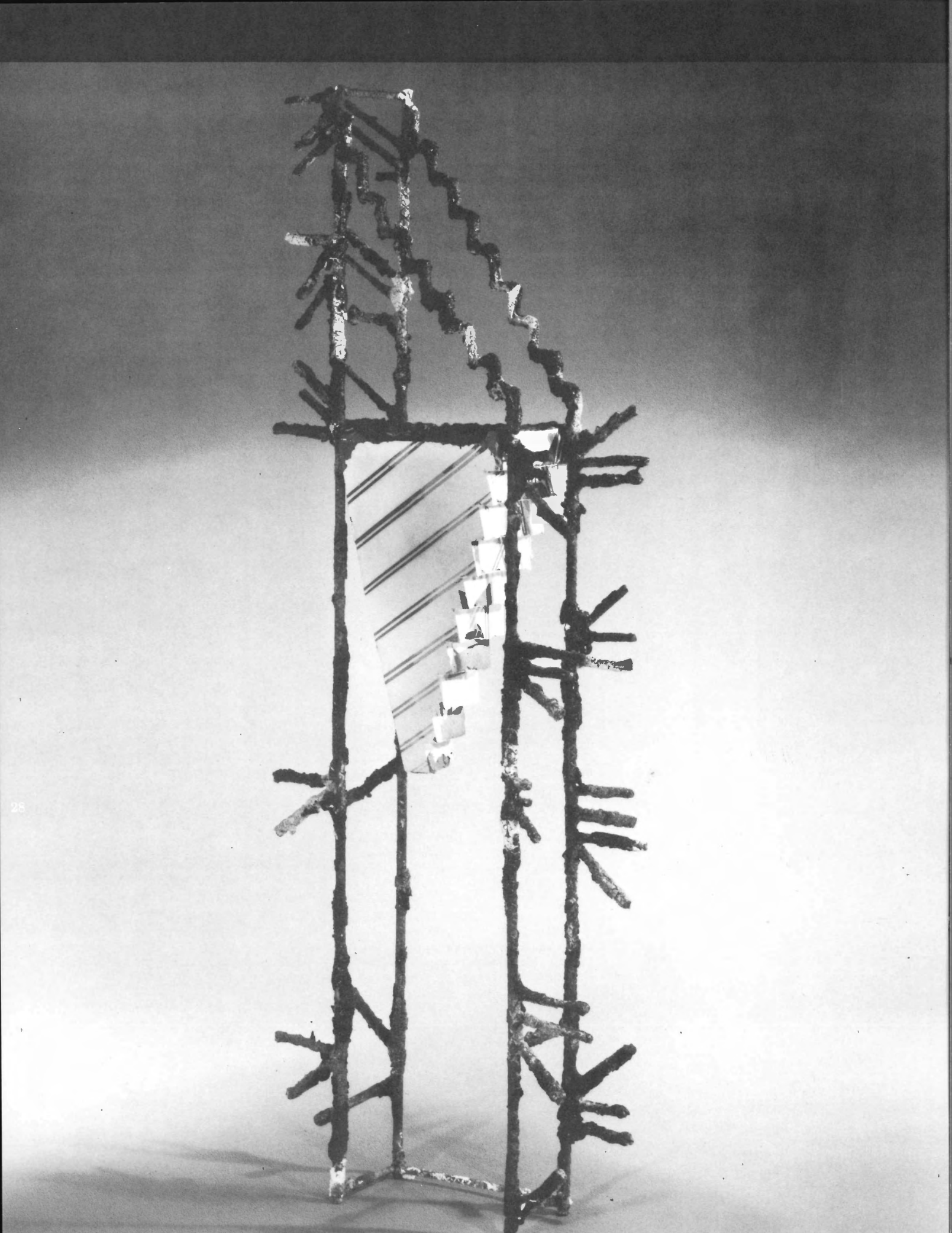
Fondaw's methods are as personal and unique as his results. "Most people work clay when it's in that soft, mushy stage," he says. "Everything is done at that stage and then it's over . . . they just fire it. I don't like to do that. I'll work on a lot of parts, fire them, and then saw them, sand them, and drill them. I like working the clay after it's fired as much or even more than before. It gives you a totally different kind of a look—a hands-off look. It has a directness about it that I like. It virtually has no story about how it was put together, and that adds to the ambiguity of scale."

Texture, Fondaw's third "essential quality of clay," is especially important to him. "I see texture as being the real statement of my pieces because I think it puts the form in context. Characteristically, Fondaw uses contrasts and tensions to emphasize this quality. As in *Uratt,* he often juxtaposes smooth slabs of porcelain veneer with the thick, gobby, greasy textures of Egyptian paste kneaded onto steel rods. "Ceramic is a thick, juicy thing," Fondaw says, "I think of it in terms of a greasy, human quality. Some of my friends kid me about being a crude mammal . . . I'm that kind of person—down to earth, really—and a lot of my inspiration for these surfaces comes directly from the ground—the street, the highways we drive on.

"I have a lot of photographs and studies of the streets: the work crews come in and cut out sections of the asphalt with those big saws and then they put in tar. Then they fill that in and paint arrows over it. When you pull your car up to a stoplight at night and look out the door, did you ever see the layers upon layers of fat, juicy paint they use on the streets? And how rocks have been embedded in it and it's kind of greasy from automobiles running over it? And the light from the car behind you striking it really accentuates the texture. That's beautiful!—it has a real quality of ceramic. Clay is a fascinating material; it can look like anything, like steel or leather or a deck of cards. But I try to bring out what I think and feel are it's inherent qualities, which are in its connotations of mass, because that's where it comes from—the earth."

Fondaw's earlier pieces were massive, solid and ground oriented (*Bly,* for example, of 1981)—related to the earth in a horizontal, stable position. When he felt he had taken the massiveness as far as it could go on that scale, he began to work in larger sizes, with linear elements supporting the mass in unlikely positions off the ground. This most recent style is related to the drawings that Fondaw constantly makes. He began using the steel rods as a way of extending his drawings into space. "The open pieces follow the idea of line on blank paper, or line in empty space. . . . In the beginning, the rods were just bare rebar without the clay. Then I started using the Egyptian paste and found it would fire onto the bars." That discovery allowed Fondaw to combine ceramic textures and mass with linear forms.

Fondaw's exploration of the essential nature of clay is only one aspect of his work. It is his affinity with Modernism. But Fondaw lives and works in the 1980s, the era of Post-Modernism, which thrives not on purist reduction to formal essences but on the inclusion of multiple references to human experience. In his sculpture, he taps the rich gestalt of historical and psychological associations surrounding clay objects. These more ephemeral essences are equally present in his sculptures. Fragility and permanence are



Uratt *(1982), 52" (132 cm) high. Photo: George Alveres. Courtesy Gallery 24, Miami.*

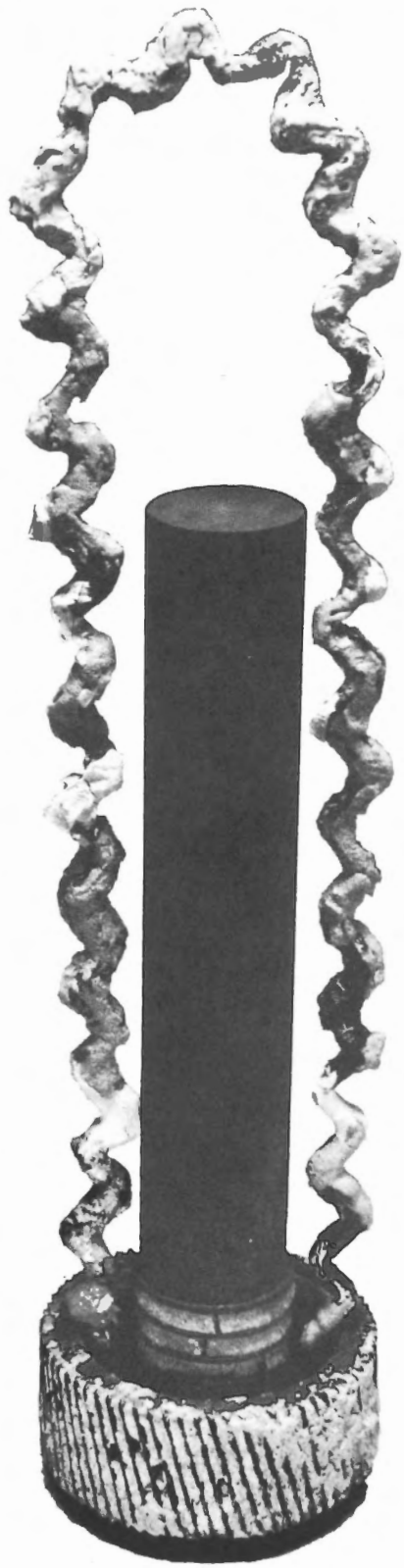
Silver *(1983), 37" (94 cm) high. Photo: Jerry D. Friedman.*

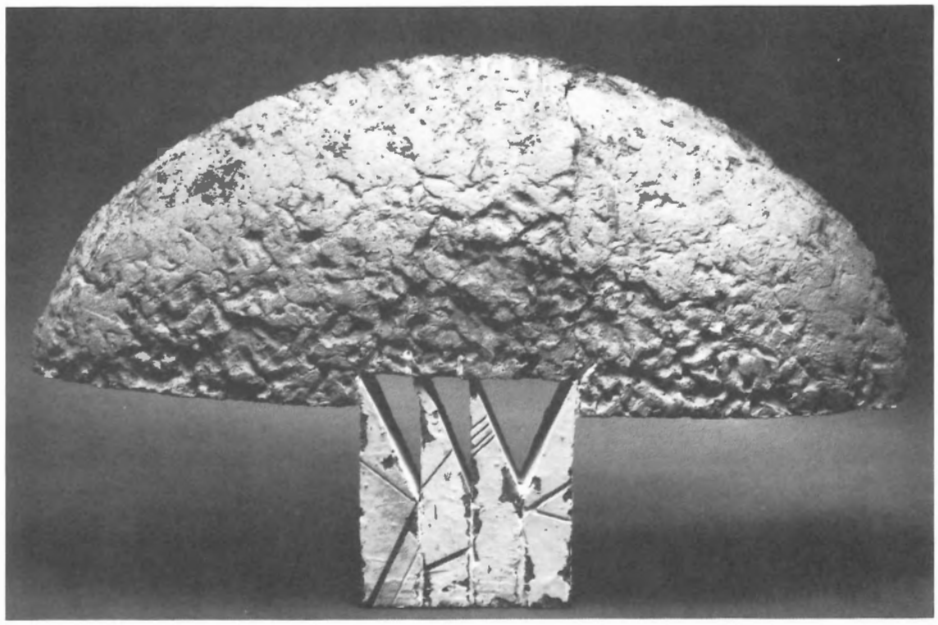
ideas that are important to him. "Ceramic is virtually indestructible," he says. "You can always glue the shards back together, which is how most of our knowledge of ancient civilizations has come about. But at the same time, it's relatively fragile. I like to enhance that in some of the veneer on these pieces, which is very fragile in relationship to the implied strength of the mass." Fondaw's thin porcelain veneers, with their delicate skins slit and inlaid with strips of color, emphasize the vulnerability of ceramics. His masses teetering on spindly legs look breakable, his ceramic-covered rods are thin and tenuous, their fingers reaching into space in ungainly rhythms.

But they seem to have survived eons of time, implied by their encrusted and scarred surfaces. "Another thing I play with," says Fondaw, "is the ambiguity of time. Because of their apparent decay, they seem old. But I use forms that are both ancient and also contemporary. Some of them are even futuristic in their simplicity and exaggeration. People have asked me if these are really decaying or if they're frozen at some point of resurrection. But they're not frozen. I use forms like the ziggurat and the zigzag because they imply movement."

The suggestion of archaeological artifact in some of Fondaw's forms strengthens the suggestion of age and time, and refers to the importance of ceramic evidence in reconstructing history. It also affects our idea of the scale of his sculptures. As Fondaw points out, "the suggestion of ancient ruins and old cities does a trick in the mind. You'll turn the piece into a model because of the connotation." He often refers to architecture in his work: the triangular form that grounds *A-Comb* suggests a dwelling with an entranceway. An entrance implies an interior, and this, too, Fondaw relates to the ceramic tradition. "That's all about the tradition of pottery. That's what pots are about—interior versus exterior. The philosophy behind a good pot is that the exterior reflects the interior and vice versa. Architecture is also about exterior/interior, but almost in an opposite way. You can have a beautiful graceful, simple form on the outside—like a geodesic dome—and when you walk inside, the space is broken up into small sections." Fondaw constantly works with the concepts of "vessel" and the ceramic tradition, but in ways that combine the analytical and sensuous—and include the playful, perverse, and abstract. By enriching the modernist search for formal essence with his own "gut affinity" with the material and its wealth of references, Fondaw's pieces, at their best, achieve an ideal of twentieth-century abstraction: to communicate meaning through form and material. He is now contemplating his next step: he has aspirations to work in larger sizes and aims to expand the definitions of ceramic sculpture, merging its forms with monumental sculpture and architecture. At present, he is investigating the possibilities of adobe as a medium that retains the traditional physicality and mythology of clay, and yet opens up possibilities for extending the tradition into the future in new situations.

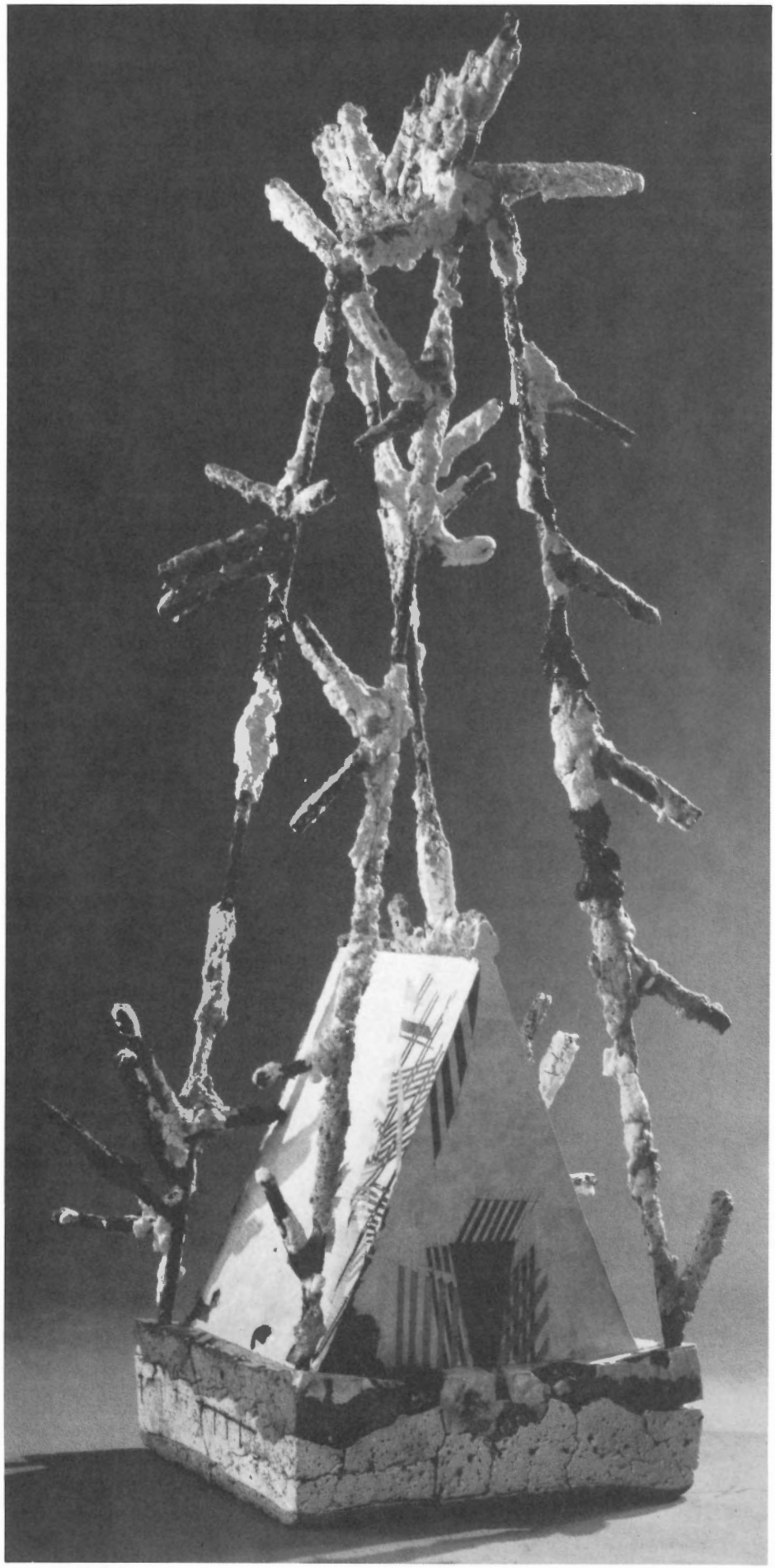
Paula Harper is an associate professor of Art History at the University of Miami in Coral Gables and art critic for the Miami News.





Bly *(1981). 18" x 42" (45.7 x 106.7 cm). Photo: Malcolm Varon.*

A-Comb *(1982), 38" (96.5 cm) high. Collection Martain Z. Margulies, Grove Isle, Florida. Photo: Malcolm Varon.*



From the Ground of Daily Experience

Heather Dawkins

For it is always possible to trace back even the most elaborate of ceramic extravaganzas, perhaps through its historical development, to a point where its feet stand, as it were, on the ground of daily experience.[1]
Philip Rawson

In recent years, Modernism in general and formalism in particular have been judged to be debilitating influences on contemporary art, by artists and theorists alike. Although formalism has not been widely discussed in the field of ceramic art—due mainly to the lack of opportunity, in the limited numbers of significant publications and exhibitions—its influence is clear nevertheless. This is especially evident in ceramics education, where the knowledge of a few has been widely disseminated to many fledgling artists over the years.
If we attempt to trace the roots of formalism in modern ceramics, as I shall do here, we find its origins in the Arts and Crafts Movement: first in the notion of "truth to materials" and later in the characterization of the art experience as a purely aesthetic emotion, divorced from everyday life. By placing its emphasis on the materials, methods, and forms of a work of art, formalism has lost sight of art's meaning or content and has severed its connections to the ground of daily experience.
Bevis Hillier succinctly discusses the concept of truth to materials:

But from the debris of Morris' theories, preached by hairy-suited Fabians and Suffragettes, and hammered into beaten copper over the mantels by the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft, one survived: art must be faithful to its materials. . . . The artist must exploit the uniqueness of his medium. Heinrich Wölfflin was to coin the word malerisch, *"painterly," to describe the arch-especial quality he looked for in a painting. "Potterly" might ungracefully describe the quality William Morris sought in Ceramics. The potter must be faithful to the homely, elemental attributes of the clay.*[2]

Morris himself has said:

Try to get the most out of your material, but always in such a way as honours it most. Not only should it be obvious what your material is, but something should be done with it which is specially natural to it, something that could not be done with any other. This is the very raison d'être of decorative art; to make stone look like iron-work, or wood like silk, or pottery like stone is the last resource of the decrepitude of art.[3]

Led by Bernard Leach, twentieth-century studio potters adopted this principle of fidelity to the clay. "But they did not take it primarily from William Morris," Hillier explains, "They took it from a country whose art had already caused a revolution in European painting—Japan. Letting the clay 'speak for itself' was the traditional observance of Japanese potters."[4] In the opening chapter of *The Potters Book,* which was the potter's bible after World War II, Leach couples material considerations with those of function:

Apart from the basic clay, the form of the pot is of the first importance, and the first thing we must look for is, as already indicated, proper adaptation to use and suitability to material.

Without these we cannot expect to find beauty in any of its modes, nobility, austerity, strength, breadth, subtlety, warmth—qualities which apply equally to our judgements of human and ceramic values.[5]

Later in the same essay, Leach extends the notion of truth to materials to include honesty of method or process:

The method by which a pot is formed determines its general character, whether hand modeled or built up out of coils or slices, or freely thrown on the wheel, or thrown in a mold, or cast entirely in a mold—each process conditions the interpretation of the original idea, and each has limited range of right usage, from the easy-flowing application of which follows the sense of satisfaction and adequacy of technique. It is for this reason that the industrial practise of rigidly separating designer on paper from maker in clay is responsible for much of the deadness of commercial pottery, for it is a waste of opportunity as well as a straining of technique to make molded pots as like thrown pots as possible. The beauty of each method lies in using that method honestly, for what it is worth, not in imitating other quite different processes.[6]

Although Hillier recognizes Leach's prominence in identifying and popularizing these issues, he assumes the potter's influence is Oriental in origin. He fails to trace Leach's early European influences, which included membership in the germinating Bloomsbury group, the Friday Club, with which Leach exhibited in 1908.[7] Leach was also an avid enthusiast of Whistler and *Japonsime.* In fact, he credits the dream to return to Japan to his admiration for this orientalist European art. Obviously, Leach's early art school experience at the Slade and the Chelsea environment precondition his interest in the parts of Japanese culture appropriate to his artistic training.

Leach moved to Japan in 1909 and there can be no doubt of the country's influence on his work and thinking. But he was by no means cut off from current developments in Western art. His close friend, Soetsu Yanagi, had traveled widely researching William Blake and Western mysticism and corresponded with Leach regularly regarding aesthetic spiritualism. When Yanagi lived in Japan, he had been the first to receive reproductions of Cézanne and Van Gogh. In 1918, Leach published "Japan's Response to Post Impressionism" in an English-language newspaper, in which he refers to "Fry and a few others"[8] as well as to Cézanne, Gauguin, Braque, Picasso, and Matisse. One statement is clearly influenced by Yanagi: "Drawing, painting, form, colour, proportion, may all be unlike nature; the question is whether the spiritual communication is expressed." It was not until more than a decade later that Leach became a follower of Bahai, and it is this religion that finally defines the spiritual communication informing his later writing and lectures in North America. Such mysticism in the second decade of 1900, the height of the popularity of theosophy in the arts, was not unusual.

Formalism's influence is not only evident in the modernist concept of truth to materials, but in its discussion of the aesthetic experience. The early formalist argument places the art object in the realm of pure sensation, divorced from daily life. Like the nether world traditionally constructed for religious experiences, the aesthetic experience is not tainted by social influences. This perception is made explicit in 1920 by Roger Fry. Writing about a Sung bowl, Fry found it posed a special problem for his aesthetic: how to separate an object of daily use from "actual life?" First, it must be a collector's bowl, once removed from its cultural use. The questions of "actual life" turn out to be those of authenticity rather than use. Thus, the use of the object has been distanced (but not erased) by the collector's discourse. Fry's argument reads:

Suppose, for example, that we are looking at a Sung bowl; we apprehend gradually the shape of the outside contour, the perfect sequence of curves, and the subtle modifications of a certain type of curve which it shows; we also feel the relation of the concave curves of the inside to the outside contour; we realize that the precise thickness of the walls is consistent with the particular kind of matter of which it is made, its appearance of density and resistance; and finally we recognize, perhaps, how satisfactorily for the display of all these plastic qualities are the colour and the dull lustre of the glaze. Now while we are thus occupied there comes to us, I think, a feeling of purpose; we feel that all these sensually logical conformities are the outcome of a particular feeling, or of what, for want of a better word, we call an idea; and we may even say that the pot is the expression of an idea in the artist's mind. Whether we are right or not in making this deduction, I believe it nearly always occurs in such aesthetic apprehension of an object of art. But in all this no element of curiosity, no reference to actual life, comes in; our apprehension is unconditioned by considerations of space or time; it is irrelevant to us to know whether the bowl was made several hundred years ago in China, or in New York yesterday. We may, of course, at any moment switch off from the aesthetic vision, and become interested in all sorts of quasi-biological feelings; we may enquire whether it is genuine or not, whether it is worth the sum given for it, and so forth; but in proportion as we do this we change the focus of our vision; we are more likely to examine the bottom of the bowl for traces of marks than to look at the bowl itself. Such, then, is the nature of the aesthetic vision, the vision with which we contemplate works of art.[9]

A later but similar example of articulated Modernism in ceramics is found in Michael Cardew's statement that "Pottery is about one thing, and one thing only, the majesty of form."[10] Cardew's notion is derived from Clive Bell's concept of "significant form"—as mediated through Herbert Read.

In 1913, Bell outlined the definition of significant form:

That there is a particular kind of emotion provoked by works of visual art, and that this emotion is provoked by every kind of visual art, pictures, sculpture, buildings, pots, carvings, textiles, etc., is not disputed, I think, by anyone capable of feeling it. . . . There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possession which, the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Franscesca and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible—significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations

of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call "Significant Form"; and "Significant Form" is the one quality common to all works of visual art.[11]

Bell's notion of significant form applies to many manufactured objects. But it is interesting to note which are specifically identified and which are generalized to the point of anonymity. Are Persian bowls indistinguishable from each other? Or are there no recognized masterpieces? Though Bell includes crafts, his list is consistent with the art historical hierarchy.
The original application of this concept of significant form was equally pertinent to abstract or representational work:

Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant.[12]

The principle of significant form has a few variations local to studio situations and specific to certain writers, but consistent to its many applications is the belief that an art object possessing it is one that is aesthetically moving.
In any case, Bell's significant form and Cardew's majesty of form both deny cultural coding. No longer a message or a tool, art and the vessel are reduced to the spectator's visual pleasure.
Though dependent on Bell's theory, Herbert Read is extreme by comparison. He claims the absolute purity of pottery as abstract art:

Pottery is pure art; it is art freed from any imitative intention. Sculpture, to which it is most nearly related, had from the first an imitative intention, and is perhaps to that extent less free for the expression of the will to form than pottery; pottery is plastic art in its most abstract essence.[13]

In this essay, Read argues that pottery is an art without content, in contrast to other art forms. (The extreme example of an art *with* content, for Read, is portraiture.) Read uses the word "content" to mean illusionism or representation; curiously, he does not distinguish between representation, replication, and objects of "ordinary production." The alignment of representation with painting, of replication with referential sculpture, and of production with (nonaesthetic) objects for daily use cannot and has not been sustained, of course. The concept of abstraction itself is meaningless without its counterpart, representation. While conventions of painting traditionally signal a relationship to representation, and verticality in sculpture may similarly indicate referentiality for sculpture, the three-dimensional form of a vessel does not necessarily *represent* or *abstract* a reference; it is *produced* in relation to its social circumstance. Herbert Read's essay nullifies the distinctions between daily experience and the aesthetic experience, but on the terms and conditions of the aesthetic "nether world."
Certain forms of art are excluded in the transition that Formalism undergoes in the translation (via Clement Greenburg) from Britain to America. While Bell's and Fry's perceptions extend to all kinds of objects, Greenburg's applies only to abstract painting. Unlike Read, Greenburg's writing does not consider the "lesser arts." If America's conquest of painting was to be successful, Greenburg argued, it would have to be separated aesthetically from any considerations that were thought to have hindered the development of art thus far.
Victor Burgin summarizes the connection between Bell, Fry, and Greenburg, documenting a sixty-year development of aesthetic thought:

Post-Cubist Western formalism, however, did not develop as a scientific aesthetic based upon a critique of the sign, but rather as a normative aesthetic based on territoriality. Greenburg's formalism is in direct line of descent from the attempt by Bell and Fry to free art from concerns not peculiarly its own. With Bell, recourse is made to a Kantian ontology (a noumenal world behind mere appearances) in order to justify abstraction, whereas Greenburg (albeit a self-avowed Kantian: "I conceive of Kant as the first real modernist") claims that the modernist art object denotes nothing other than itself; "Thus would each art be rendered 'pure' and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence."[14]

It is this type of thinking that has informed much of contemporary ceramics. What is unselfconsciously missing from these descriptions is reference to economic, social, political, domestic, or technological influences, which either inform or restrict the production or reception of objects. For many artists and critics, independence from sociological determinants means a transcendence of social values.
As already stated, this transcending Formalism is a newer idea for ceramic training than for the fine arts in general, even though the 1917 writing by Bell refers to pots, and the twenties writing by Read is explicitly "pro-pottery." However, in North America, Greenburg's writing precedes the rapid growth of ceramics. His theories mix with those of his predecessors, to be sure, but his evaluation is narrower and predominates in the United States context. Ceramics was basically formalist, but lacked a major American spokesperson. Lower visibility and a lack of written theory resulted. Furthermore, the exclusion of ceramics from mainstream art was demonstrably clear.
The absolute dependence of abstract art on the gallery and related social institutions has been firmly established by artists and theorists. Greenburg's hypothesis that purity equals independence has been proven overly optimistic and blindly confident. In hand with it are the tendencies of Bell, Read, and Fry to colonize all cultural artifacts under the identification of universal principles of abstract form and aesthetically moving visual elements. Philip Rawson recognizes this imperialist attitude in the opening chapter of his book, but is barely able to pose an alternative:

It is easy for us in our day to believe that once we physically possess an object, and can visit it maybe repeatedly in a museum, it is ours in every sense. We believe that we can understand the uprooted works of art we may have wrenched out of their bed in the culture of other peoples. We have even developed a special theory to persuade ourselves that we are missing nothing in works drawn from what was grotesquely called "40,000 years of Modern Art." The theory rests upon one misunderstanding or another of that familiar notion of "pure form" or "abstract structure." It is, of course, ridiculous to believe that only the method of arrangement used in

an art was of any significance even to the original makers—though they may not have known it![15]

This qualifies Formalism as a language of myth in Roland Barthes's terms:

Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant; it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from. Or even better: it can only come from eternity: since the beginning of time, it has been made for bourgeois man. . . . Nothing is produced, nothing is chosen: all one has to do is possess these new objects from which all soiling trace of origin or choice has been removed.[16]

As Rawson points out, the attitude toward ceramics appreciation, especially at the professional level, disavows history. This is despite the archaeological evidence that emphasizes the political, domestic, economic, sociological, and technological references of ceramics. This imperialist attitude is compounded by the absence of craft history courses in most institutions. A formalist perception is able to universalize the specific cultural object or the cultural codes of representation because it recognizes only visual elements stripped of meaning.

Unable to resolve this problem, Rawson simply suggests that, "If possible we must try to discover, through active use of imagination, how the live meanings of works of ceramic art which played some role in the life of every patron can be revived in our own minds."[17] More of what ceramics is or has been about must be recognized if current criticism and history are to rise above the level of mere chatter.

Unfortunately, though, more than an active imagination is needed to replace the formalist perception that retards a richer understanding of ceramics. A self-conscious and critical understanding of criticism as mythical language is necessary. A historically based method that analyzes more than the visual elements of representation or structures of the vessel is indispensible. An examination of the changing reception of ceramic objects is also necessary. And above all, we must rediscover the connections between ceramic objects and the ground of daily experience, such as may be found in food preparation, domestic architecture, the rise of a middle class, the influence of a foreign culture, or the conditions of production, whether family, collective, factory, or gender based.

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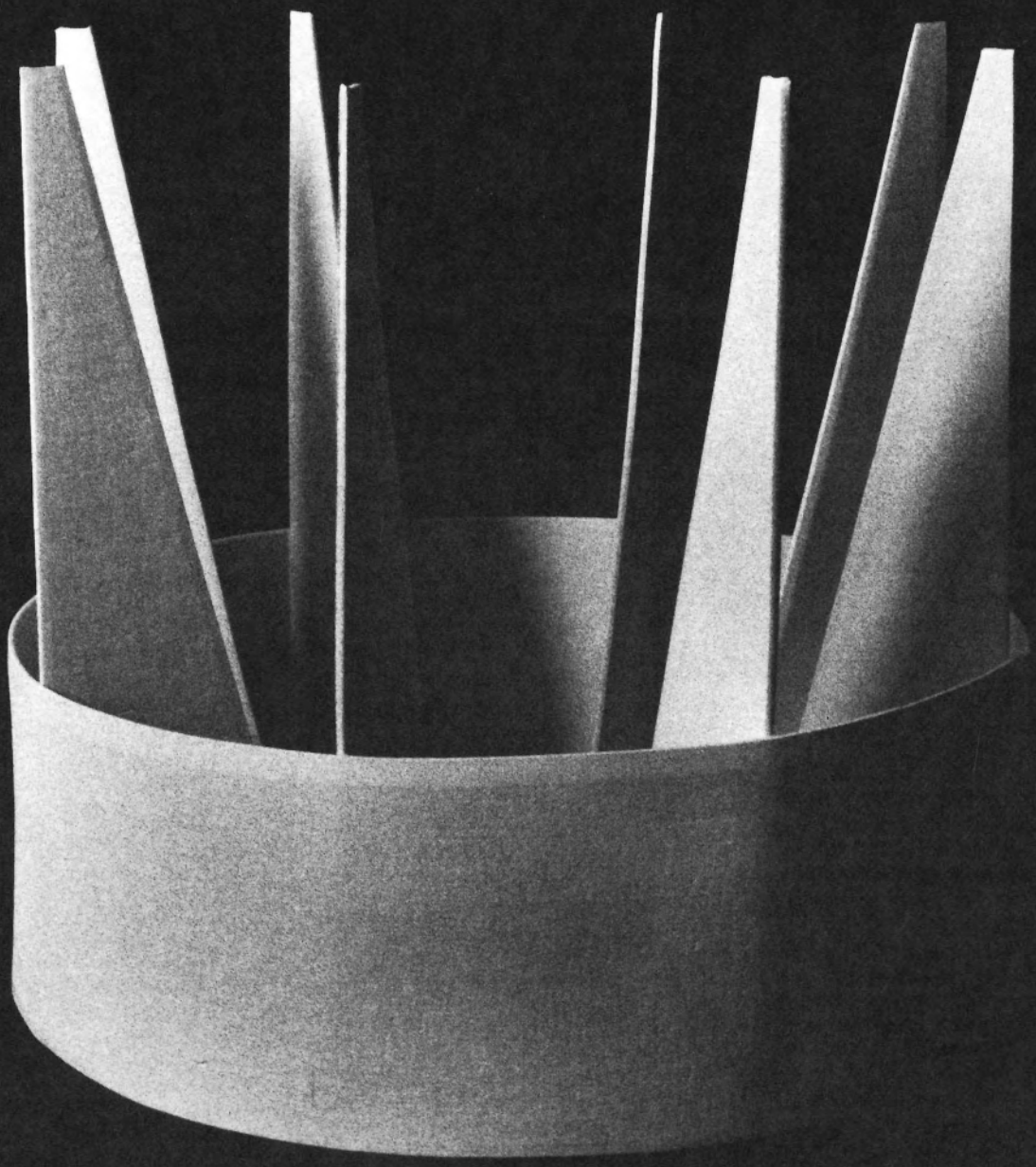
1. Philip Rawson, *Ceramics,* the Appreciation of the Arts/6 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 6.
2. Bevis Hillier, *Pottery and Porcelain 1700–1914* (New York: Meredith Press, 1968), pp. 260, 263.
3. William Morris, *Art and the Beauty of the Earth* (1881), as found in Hillier, *Pottery and Porcelain,* p. 260.
4. Hillier, *Pottery and Porcelain,* p. 263.
5. Bernard Leach, *A Potter's Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), p. 19
6. Ibid., p. 20.
7. Richard Stone, *Bloomsbury Portraits* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1975), p. 26.
8. Bernard Leach, *Beyond East and West* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 120.
9. Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920, and Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 34–35.
10. Michael Cardew, *Studio Potter* vol. 7, no. 1, p. 47.
11. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn Books, Putnam and Sons, 1958), pp. 17–18.
12. Ibid., p. 27.
13. Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), p. 42.
14. Victor Burgin, *Modernism in the Work of Art* (Stedelijk: Eindhoven Van Abbemuseum, 1977), p. 42.
15. Rawson, *Ceramics,* pp. 3, 5.
16. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p. 151.
17. Rawson, *Ceramics,* p. 5.



Texas Clay

Janet Kutner

Audiences seeking a visual link between regional art and geography were surprised by "Texas Clay," a recent survey of work by seven artists currently living in the state. None of the works makes specific reference to the Southwest; nor do any of them fit the traditional functional context of ceramics. Rather, each artist adapts the methodology of craft to the vernacular of painting or sculpture. Although each uses color or texture to accentuate structure, Danville Chadbourne, Piero Fenci, Barbara Frey, and Nicholas Wood work as sculptors. John Fleming and Claudia Reese employ forms merely as a vehicle for pattern; painterliness is the strongest aspect of their works. Steve Reynolds incorporates handcrafted components as well as found objects into environmental installations that become conceptual games in which observers search for visual connections between disparate elements.

The quietest works in the show are the strongest. Fenci's elegant bisqued porcelain "structures"—none measure more than two feet in diameter, and all are designed to be exhibited on pedestals—establish a sense of place and draw the viewer into their spaces. Frey's salt-glazed stoneware "houses" also exert a strong sculptural presence, even if the forms she has been exploring for several years have become so flattened that it is difficult to visually enter them. Both Fenci and Frey use clay unpretentiously, while forcing it to unusual limits. Their work is further linked by abstract rather than realistic allusions to architecture.

Fenci's pieces resemble walled fortresses from which a series of sharp wedges protrude. Metaphorically, they might be figures trying to escape circular prison walls. Yet these works are totally abstract, and they attack formal sculptural problems. The soft pinkish white color, matt finish, and subtle linenlike texture of each form enhances its surreal, other-worldly character, dispelling any notion of function. The clay is worked to a fragility that intentionally contradicts its sturdier architectonic context.

Fenci's forms can readily be appreciated for their beauty and integrity; but the shapes themselves and sensitive placement of the sharp components introduces an edgy, off-balance quality. The longer one experiences these "structures," the more obvious their eccentricities appear. Fenci's works are unusual in their simultaneous abilities to please and challenge the viewer.

Frey also explores containment, but her work more noticeably addresses surface enhancement of form. Her "houses" have become increasingly flat and uninhabitable and now function more as containers for ideas than as shelters. Some of the recent works are so compressed that she calls them "Envelopes." Textures recall corrugated metal barns found in East Texas, and colors are earthier, less intense than some of the vibrant blues she once used. The rich textural quality of the new works is accomplished partly by combining various patterns into a patchwork effect that suggests the piecemeal repairwork customary on farm buildings. But the bumpy surfaces and complex patterns serve a more formal purpose as well, enlivening the exterior of each piece.

Poetic and mysterious, these pedestal pieces appear solidly rooted to place, though that place could be nearly any rural environment.

Chadbourne and Reese both make vertical life-size pieces with ritualistic and totemic aspects. But the similarity ends there. Chadbourne's archetypal sculptures are primal, recalling the solidity and endurance of prehistoric stone monuments. Despite strong figurative allusions, they exert a mythic, archaeological presence.

Chadbourne prefers rough, almost crude finishes. He achieves a variety of effects by smoking, glazing, or painting the clay's surface for earthy tones ranging from brown and dark red to blackish gray. Even when installed in a gallery, his organic sculptures look as though they have sprung full-grown from the ground. They function as ritual objects, with strong phallic or sexual allusions. Their forms are consistently, obsessively upright, but the concave sections of some pieces convey a human presence, their hollows suggesting the sunken chest cavities of a living being.

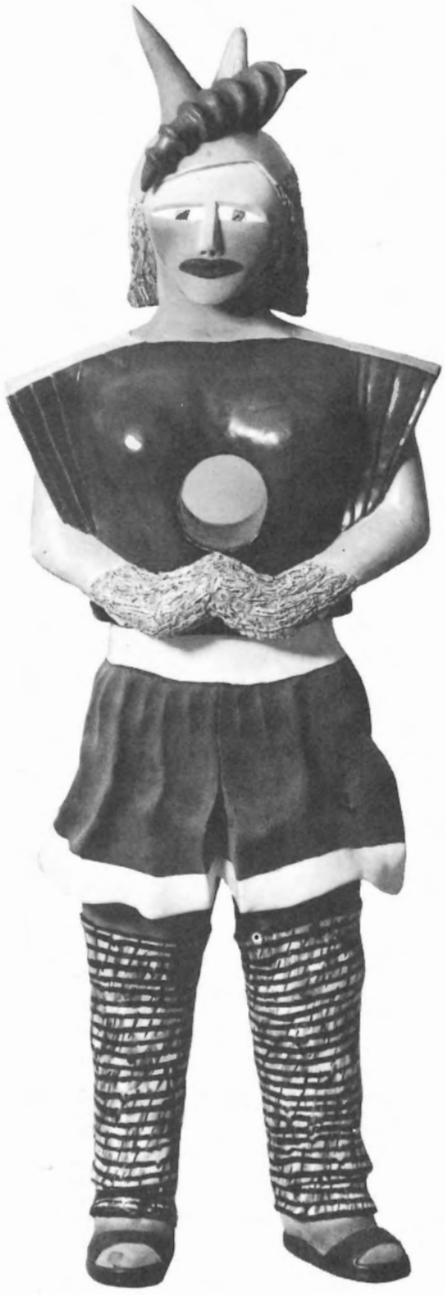
Reese's fantasy figures are both playful and serious. Her current series is titled *Red Shoes,* in reference to the foot ornaments worn by each personage. Garishly colored and extravagantly patterned, these works nonetheless exude a powerful spirit. Neither human or birdlike, they evoke each, remaining all the while stable, their stiff postures resembling cigar store Indians.

Technical feats, these painterly sculptures combine elements of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and more recent New Image painting. The cacophony of their clashing surfaces provides a certain degree of animation, but for all their busyness, these are strangely lifeless forms. The rigidity can be attributed only in part to stylization of gesture; it results also from a tendency to devote excessive attention to superficialities such as pattern and superfluities such as headgear.

More dynamic and more lively are Fleming's tiny low-fire clay forms with high-gloss commercial finishes. Their shapes are peculiar, their surfaces gaudy. Intuitively accomplished, both their form and purpose remain ambiguous. Some are squashy, others alert. Despite their abstract components, their animated stances suggest they are creatures, though they tease the viewer into thinking they are pots or cups.

Fleming's exquisitely detailed clay objects are installed on meticulously crafted pedestals and frames that project them

Sysko IV *by Piero Fenci, 17" (43.2 cm) high.*



just the right distance from the floor and wall. Decorative in the best sense of the word, Fleming's works are visually exhilarating, aesthetically stimulating. They challenge conventional pictorial and sculptural notions. But more than anything else, their wry comments on the state of art suggest that it has become so multidisciplinary and eclectic that it no longer fits any neat category.

Wood's small terra-cotta wall reliefs are more formal explorations of form, surface, and dimension. They constitute visual collages of opposing, multifaceted forms, their abutting and jutting edges strongly reminiscent of Cubist compositions. Earlier, Wood had made complex ceramic grids with colors splattered freely across their latticework surfaces. But order has replaced spontaneity, and the recent dense wall tablets, titled *Sites,* are considerably more ambitious in their deliberate play of negative and positive spaces. The dynamic character of the works, whether single panels, diptychs, or triptychs, is accomplished partly by the asymmetrical arrangement of geometric components. But it is also achieved by glazes subtle enough to lend the works a sensuous quality but sufficiently varied to keep the eye moving from one surface to another. Wood continues to manipulate the viewer's perceptions, making some reliefs appear much deeper, others more shallow than they actually are. He also establishes a tension between reality and illusion by aggressively thrusting certain components against the soft shadows created as light plays across the reliefs' surfaces.

Reynolds's environmental pieces lack restraint deliberately, though they represent an intellectually ordered system. The no-holds-barred approach to Expressionism frees Reynolds to explore a mêlange of materials, from found objects to painted canvas, clay, and wood. He extends his excessive installations along the floor and up onto the walls, attempting to construct visual links between apparently incongruous elements. The overall results are more chaotic than cohesive, although recurring symbols such as birds, cylinders, and sweeping gestures of color suggest vague surrealistic connections. Forms range from organic to phallic, and motifs vary from geometric to animalistic. Despite their high energy, these works generally are too disjunctive to be visually pleasing and too obscure to sustain intellectual curiosity.

There is always the danger that group shows such as this will define a trend or identify a style that has not yet been widely recognized. But such is not the case in this instance. The diverse approaches of these seven artists reflect the individualism that makes the Texas art climate so vigorous today.

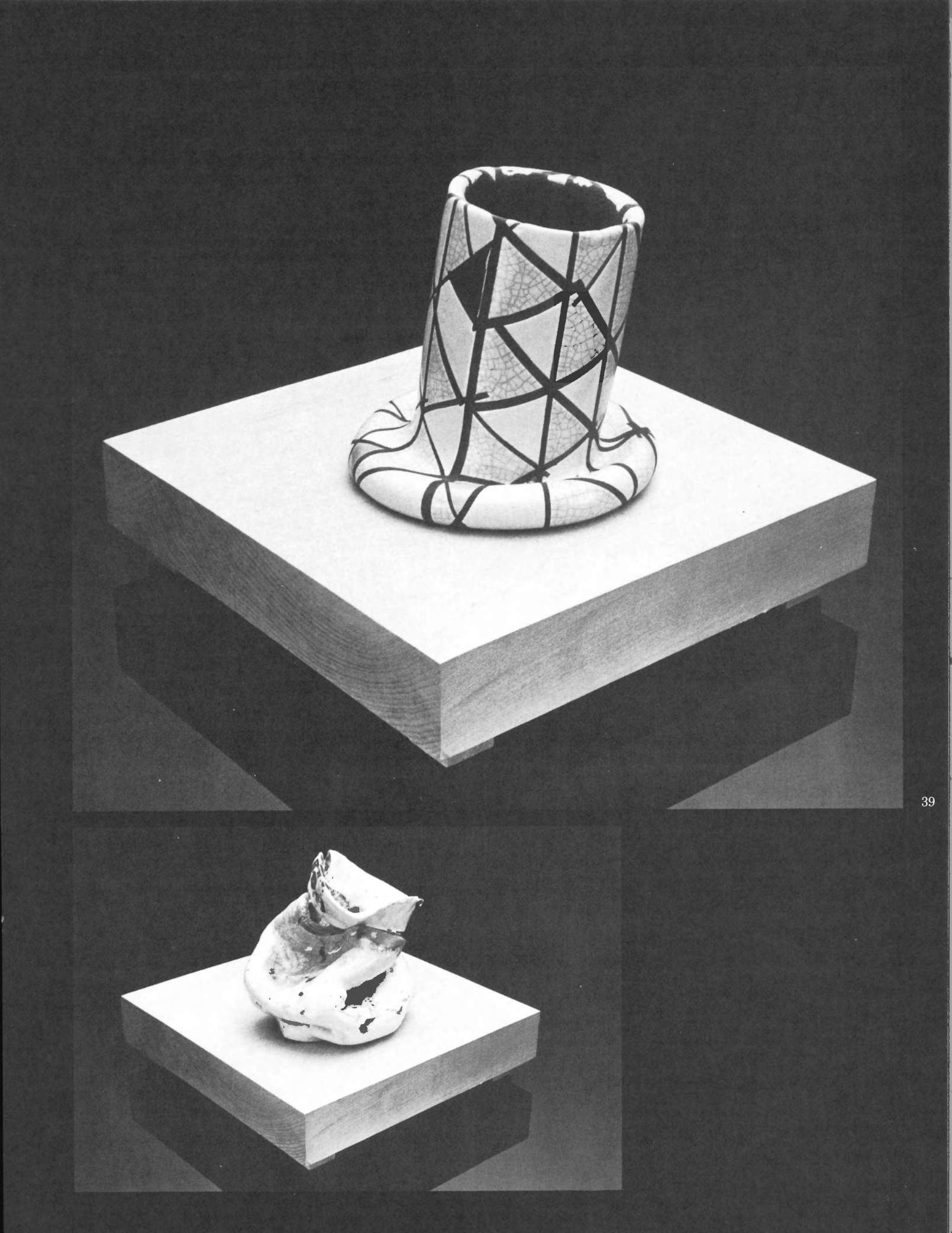
Clay artists, like painters and sculptors, are thriving during a period when no readily discernible style of regionalism exists. Nor are they turning to New York or Europe for inspiration. Rather, artists currently living in Texas seem to value the rare opportunity for independence that their distance from the mainstream provides.

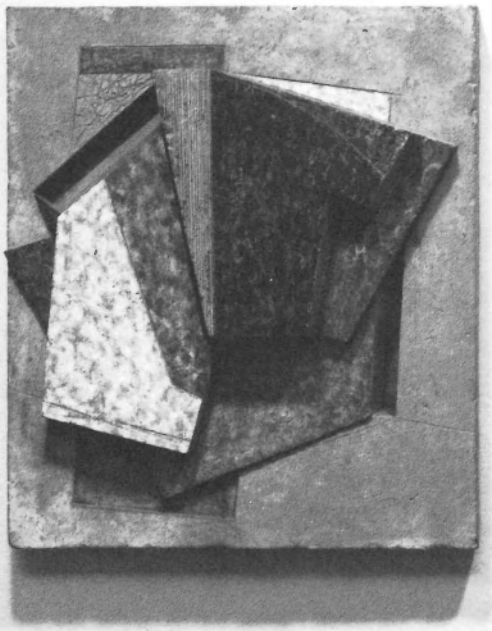
Janet Kutner has been the art critic for The Dallas Morning News *since 1970. This essay was prompted by the exhibition "Texas Clay," organized by Caroline Lee, owner-director of Objects Gallery in San Antonio, held at the Gallery of the University of Texas at San Antonio (July 5–August 5, 1983).*

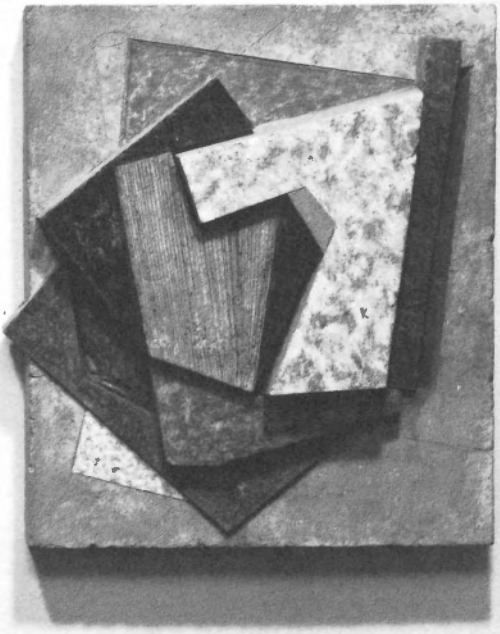
Red Shoe *Series (1983) by Claudia Reese. Photo: Bill Kennedy.*

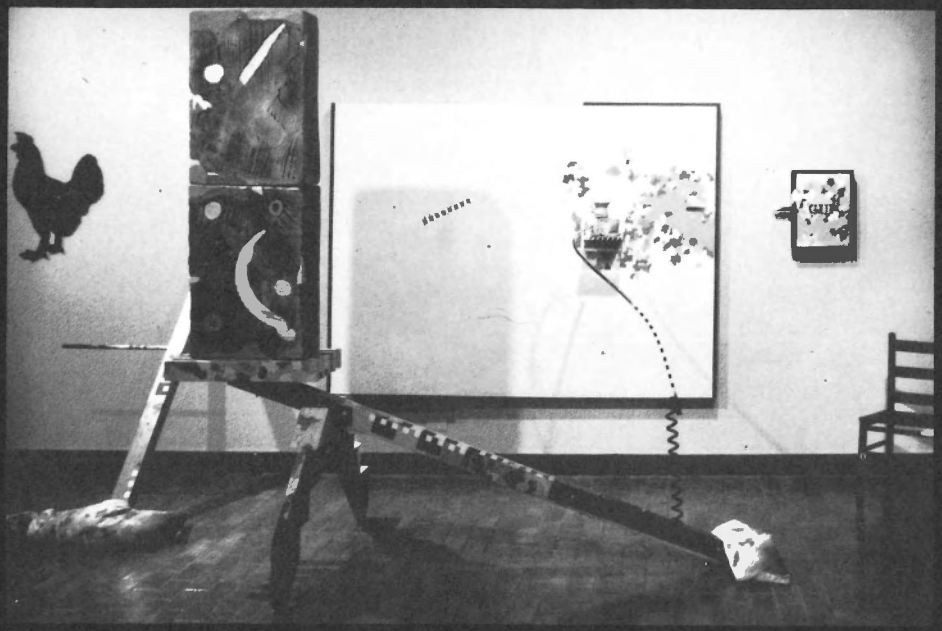
Liz T. *by John Fleming, 8" (20.3 cm) high. Photo: Dan Barsotti.*

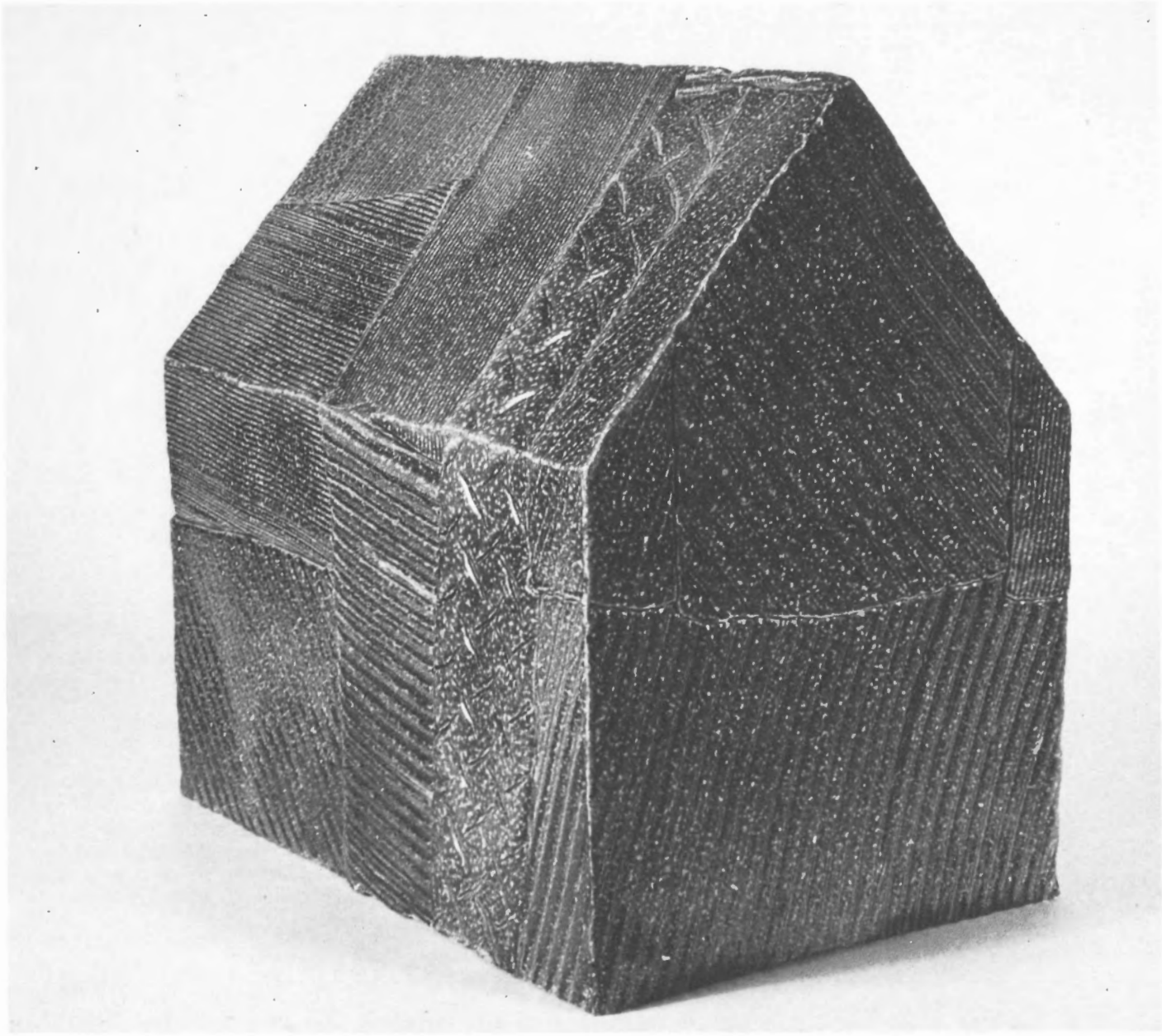
Gabby *by John Fleming, 6" (15.2 cm) high. Photo: Dan Barsotti.*









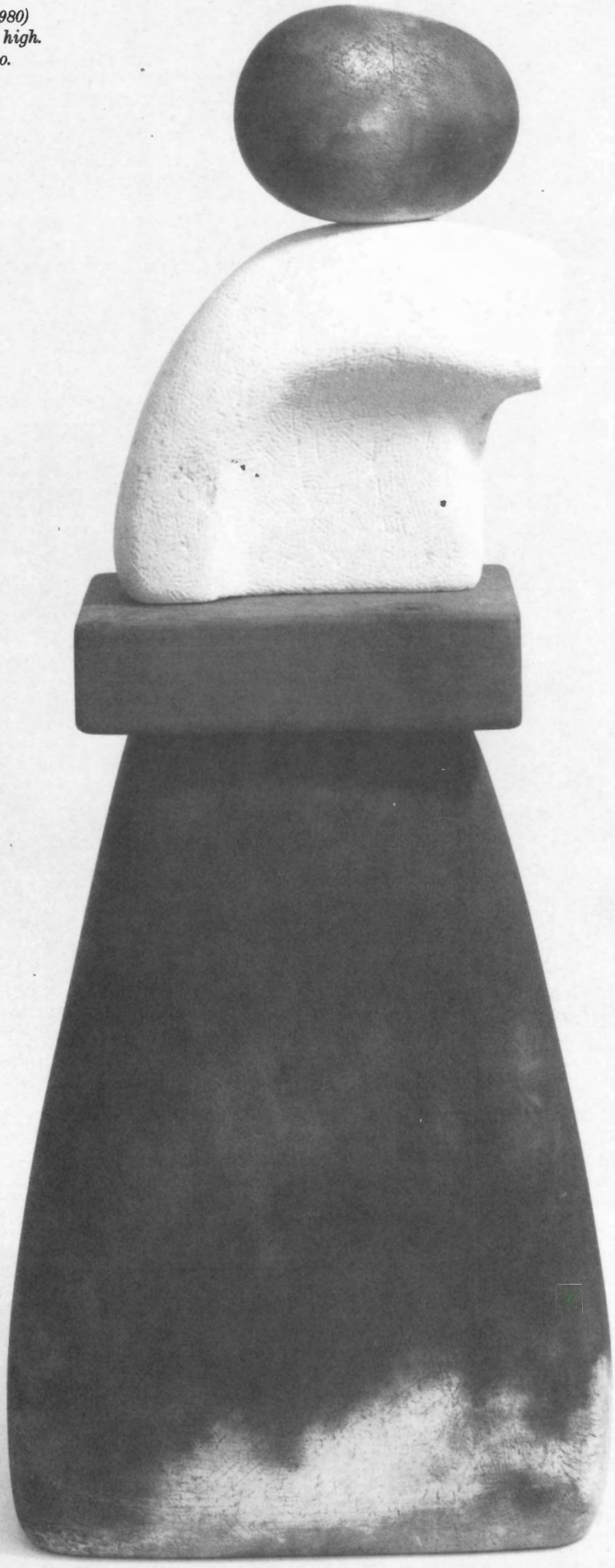


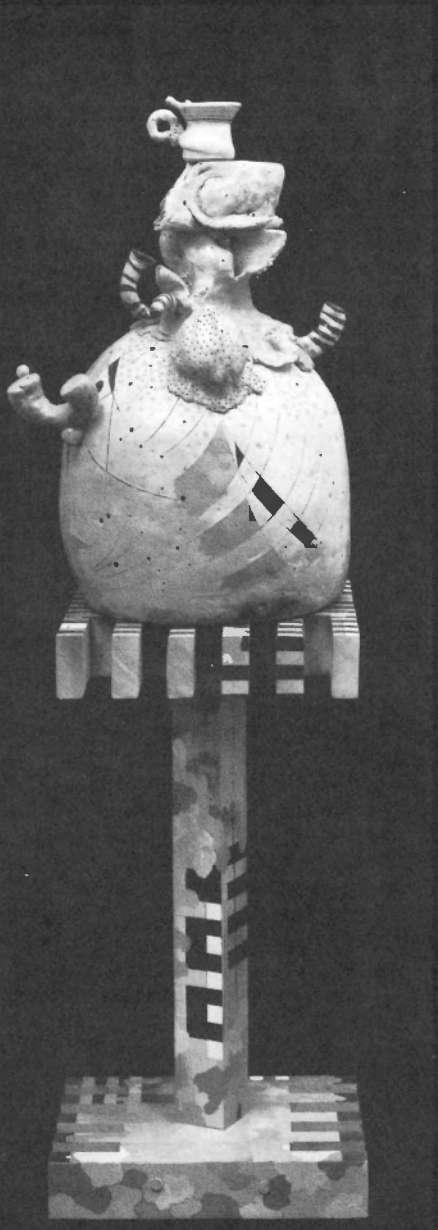
Site IV—Premonition *(1982–83) by Nicholas Wood, 15½" x 34" x 4" (39 x 85 x 10 cm). Photo: Joe Doherty.*

Chicken Cup *by Steve Reynolds, 8' x 15' x 6' (2 x 3.8 x 1.5 m).*

Raked Kabuki House *(1983) by Barbara Frey, 11½" (29 cm) high. Courtesy Objects Gallery, San Antonio.*

The Convoluted Rhetoric of Truth *(1980)*
by Danville Chadbourne, 48" (122 cm) high.
Courtesy Objects Gallery, San Antonio.





Jester *by Steve Reynolds, 60″ (150 cm) high.*

The Omaha Brickworks

Lorne Falk

The word "alternative" is synonomous with choice, discrimination, desire, judgment, and dilemma, which are some of the inhernet qualities and skills of the art-making process. The alternative worksite is a place where these skills are tested, pushed, and developed. It is a place where artists can concentrate on new work, experimental production, and creative problem-finding, without the distractions of daily routines and a sometimes too-familiar environment. It is a place where artists from different backgrounds come together willingly to share in the discovery of new ideas and insights for their work. The alternative worksite is typically a focused and unique environment in which these fresh perspectives and new perceptions flourish. It is immediate and intense. Here, there are no failures or disasters, and no imposing institutional priorities. It is easy to see why the alternative worksite has played such an important role in art. Places like Artpark, Pilchuck, the Archie Bray Foundation, and the Kohler Company are present-day examples of the alternative worksite's rich tradition and continuing contribution to art. While they vary greatly in structure and in intent, they are all "artist-friendly." Providing a temporary escape from those secondary concerns artists must constantly attend to in order to make their way in the artworld.

The Omaha Brickworks is another such place. In three short years, it has evolved from relative obscurity to become a vital and cherished alternative for a growing number of ceramists in America.

The setting is a small industrial brickyard of the same name, which has operated continuously since 1926 (except for a setback during the Depression). The present owner, Maurice Cullen, inherited the business from his father in 1946. The brickyard is located in a light industrial sector fifteen miles from downtown Omaha, on nine acres of land bounded by a small creek and a thin stretch of woods. The site includes a clay pit, four beehive kilns, and the support technology to make bricks and tiles. The artists who come to work here occupy one corner of the brickyard in an area surrounding three of the large, thirty-five-foot, circular kilns. During the workshops, two of the kilns are used as studios and drying areas. In addition to an immediate and limitless supply of clay, artists have access to a variety of wet brick forms, tiles, and extrusions. And, of course, there are a very large number of fired, red brown modular units stacked on pallets everywhere—bricks.

Ree Schonlau discovered the brickyard while still at school, when she was looking for a gutsy clay body for her own work. But it was not until three years ago that Schonlau had the inspiration to use the brickyard as an alternative worksite. She

Betty Woodman decorating the 1,600 tiles of her mural.

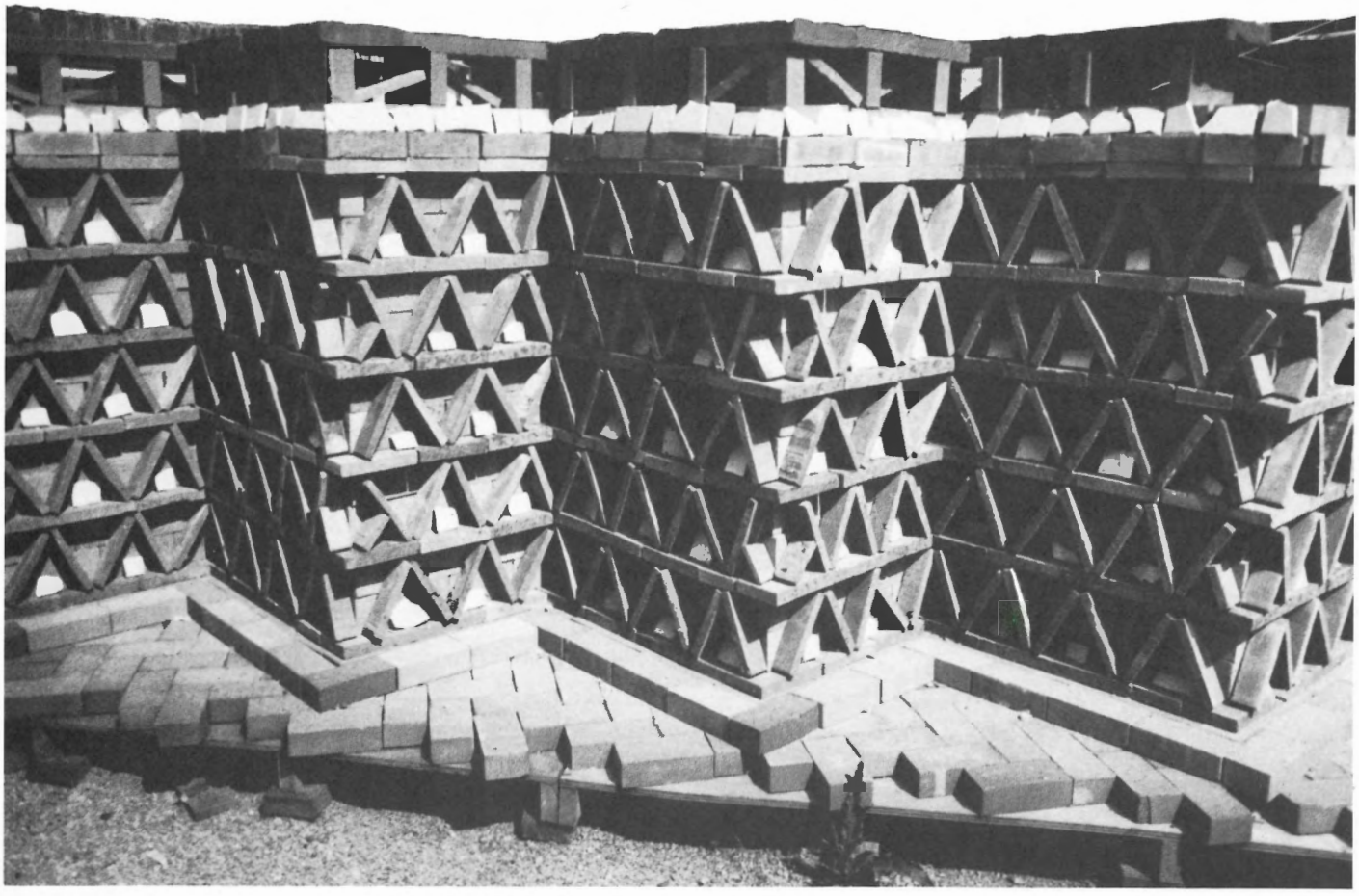
Wayne Higby constructed this brick wall in his exploration of architectural structures.

was organizing an exhibition of ceramic sculpture for her gallery and, as part of the exhibition, asked Tony Hepburn to conduct a weekend workshop in her building. When Hepburn arrived in Omaha, Schonlau broached the idea of doing a second workshop at the Brickworks. He visited the site and enthusiastically agreed. In 1981, the first workshop was held with twenty participants, led by Hepburn and coordinated by Schonlau. It was so successful, Schonlau immediately made plans for two workshops the following year, one with Jun Kaneko and one with Ken Little. Even though poor enrollment forced the cancellation of Little's workshop, the energy and success of Kaneko's workshop convinced Schonlau to organize a third program.

Schonlau expanded her program for 1983, bringing the potential of this alternative worksite abruptly into focus. In May and June of this year, the program included five resident artists and two workshops led by four studio artists. Looking for experience and consistency in this still-formative enterprise, Schonlau invited Hepburn and Kaneko back to run the first workshop and she asked Wayne Higby and Betty Woodman to lead the second. Schonlau also coordinated special projects that Kaneko and Woodman had conceived for their time at the Brickworks. The resident artists—Eva Kwong, Kirk Mangus, Terry Rosenberg (also the technical assistant for the workshops), Thurmon Statom, and Arnold Zimmerman—spent four to six weeks working independently. The workshop participants were a remarkably mature collection of individuals, which included graduate students and teachers from across the country. Collectively, the workshop participants, studio artists, and resident artists formed an intimate, spirited, and astonishing community.

The reasons why these artists came to the Omaha Brickworks were remarkably consistent. Invariably, the first reason was personal and directly related to the artists' work: They needed a radical shift in daily routine to reconnect themselves with the excitement of creative frontiers. For example, Kathy Holt (a workshop participant) came to the Brickworks to find a contrast to the work she had been doing and to clarify what direction she might pursue. One year out of graduate school and already teaching, she felt she was losing perspective on her work. A second reason people came to the Omaha Brickworks was the opportunity to work in an intimate setting with a collection of like-minded, well-known artists—artists such as Higby, Kaneko, and Woodman. As Eva Kwong, who has worked in similar situations, pointed out, "the real difference is the attitude of the artists Ree Schonlau invites to the Brickworks." This attitude was revealed on the first day of the workshop, when Hepburn told the participants that there were no teachers here, only a group of artists equally committed to genuine dialogue and exploration. Finally, the Brickworks provided an opportunity to work in an industrial environment that not only provided the facilities for the artists to work, but also provided unique possibilities for their work to grow. Woodman, for example, wanted to do something that directly took advantage of what a brickyard normally does. Using extruded tiles, she produced a large mural or façade of decorative elements on a scale not possible for her before.

While the brickyard is small by present-day standards, its size is ideal for an alternative worksite. Not only do the artists experience the rhythm of the industry's day-to-day operations, they also have immediate contact with the people who work there. For the artists to work successfully in an industrial setting, a relationship of mutual trust and opportunity must be established, and at the Omaha Brickworks, just such a relationship has developed. Owner Cullen admitted his initial scepticism for the idea, and he found little of real value to anyone during the first workshop. However, with more exposure to the experimental and creative nature of the worksite's activities, his opinion has changed. In particular, his



personal interaction in successive years with Hepburn and Kaneko has turned Cullen's skepticism to respect—respect for the knowledge and skill of the artists and for the educational value the worksite provides young artists. Ever practical, Cullen says he has also learned new techniques and new possibilities for his business—different firing methods and a larger color palette for his products, for example. He has also benefitted from proposals by some of the artists, who make pots for him to sell in exchange for clay and firing, and the workshops have attracted a new clientele to his business. At Omaha Brickworks, both artists and industry prosper from a relationship that is mutually supportive and enthusiastic, and it is one of the real strengths of this alternative worksite.

The workshops here are not the usual thing. There is no formal instruction. Instead, artists simply come together to do their work and to interact freely with other participants. As the sessions are only one week in length, the activity is fastpaced and intense. A typical workshop begins with a brief orientation to the industry and what it can provide; what must be respected while working there; and establishing individual work areas. By the end of the first day, everyone is at work. Twenty-four hours later, one cannot help but feel that the artists have been working for weeks, instead of hours. The brickyard environment provides a dynamic, timeless context in which a strong feeling of comradeship quickly evolves. Preconceptions are soon shed and experimentation, collaboration, and exchange become commonplace.

David Stabley and Richard Usrey, for example, collaborated throughout the workshop, each agreeing to let the other freely alter his work. As Stabley said, "the collaborative process provided me with an objective distance to look at my work . . . when a person changes what you have made, you *have* to question your own intentions. My work has become more dynamic and controlled as a result." The collaboration was so beneficial. Stabley has continued the process at home by building work and inviting other artists to change it.

Sometimes the effects of the workshop are even more dramatic, as was the case for Toni Ross. She had come to the Brickworks looking for a solution to her frustration with her work and with clay. She found a solution, but it wasn't in clay. The Brickworks environment itself so fascinated her, she began to make drawings of it. This was the first time in her life she had worked with charcoal and paper; now she is happily painting.

Such insights are supported by and shared with the other participants through daily slide presentations and informal group discussions, providing an atmosphere in which such growth can happen very quickly. This atmosphere is further enriched by regular visits from collectors, a curious public, and interested artists. As one participant, Julie Tesser, said, "The Brickworks is like a three-dimensional sketch book—a place where there is the freedom to work for yourself in a *total* sense. Yet there is so much stimulation and support, you never feel totally isolated or lost." And as Hepburn pointed out, at the Brickworks there are no tables to work on: educational values are challenged and, in their place, a simple commitment to doing your work in communion with other artists is established. In short, the Omaha Brickworks is unlike anything one is likely to encounter in an institutional or studio environment.

Schonlau is very clear about why she started an alternative worksite at the Omaha Brickworks. In practical terms, she says it is simply a great place to work—a giant toyland in which all the ceramist's materials, tools, and equipment are dramatically larger in scale.

Philosophically, Schonlau believes that artists should be seen as integral, contributing members of society; the artist-industry relationship is one concrete way of realizing the artist's contribution. Unfortunately, most of society and most of industry do not see artists this way. The Omaha Brickworks is Schonlau's attempt to rectify this state of affairs. In short, her

motivation for starting the Brickworks has more to do with her instincts as an artist than her determination as a gallery owner. In the future, Schonlau envisions the worksite operating at least four months each year. To this end, she has established a board of directors, comprised of artists, to help her in its development and financing. However, the future of the Omaha Brickworks rests most securely on its lineal history; for the Brickworks is more than an alternative worksite. It is the third component of an ambitious enterprise that includes a sales shop and a gallery, also run by Schonlau.

Twelve years ago, Schonlau and a small group of women formed a cooperative that maintained studios and a small gallery/shop for its members, located on the first floor of a building in the warehouse district of downtown Omaha. Three years later, the cooperative disbanded and Schonlau took over the building, establishing The Craftsmen's Gallery, which included a sales shop and an exhibition space for featured artists. In 1979, Schonlau renovated the second floor of the building and began to organize major exhibitions of work by artists across America. The combination of a sales shop, with its featured artists, and the Ree Schonlau Gallery provided both revenue and exposure for artists. Curators, collectors, and an appreciative public have come to recognize the Craftsmen's Gallery and the Schonlau Gallery as important focal points for contemporary ceramics. The Omaha Brickworks is a perfect compliment to these two operations, because it recognizes the essential need of artists to make their work—without forsaking the need for exposure and sales. Through the marriage of these three components, Schonlau provides her audience with insight into the full spectrum of artistic endeavour, from the origin of ideas to the celebration of finished work. This in itself is a remarkable achievement, but what distinguishes Schonlau's venture is her commitment to the artists' best interests before all else. The creation of the Omaha Brickworks as an alternative worksite for artists is a concrete assertion of this commitment.

Lorne Falk has worked in artist-run spaces and alternative situations for more than ten years. He is presently curator of the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, which provides young artists with an alternative studio environment in painting, sculpture, printmaking, fiber, photography, and ceramics.

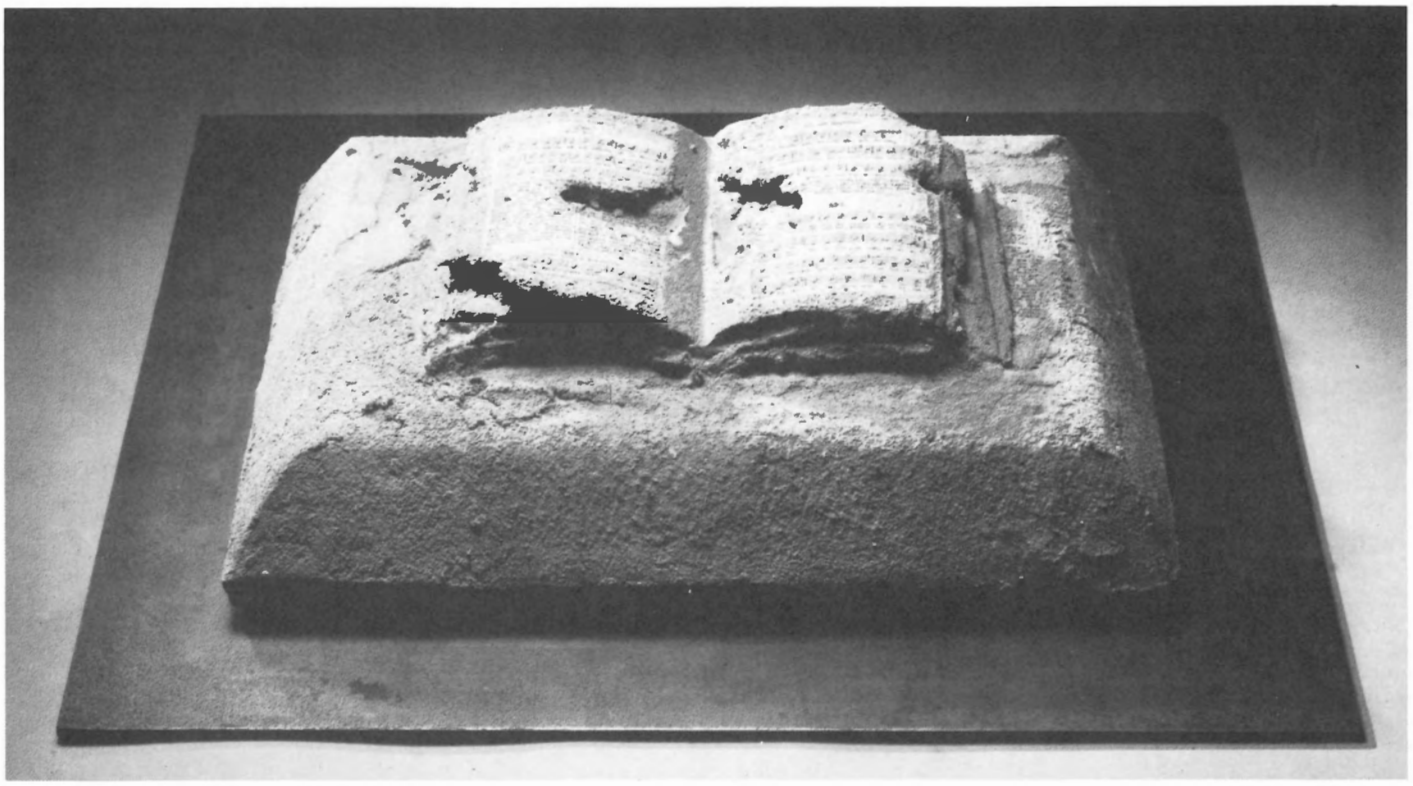
After producing sculptures for two weeks, Kirk Mangus wanted to throw pots; these planters and jars he traded to Brickworks owner Maurice Cullen in exchange for free firing.

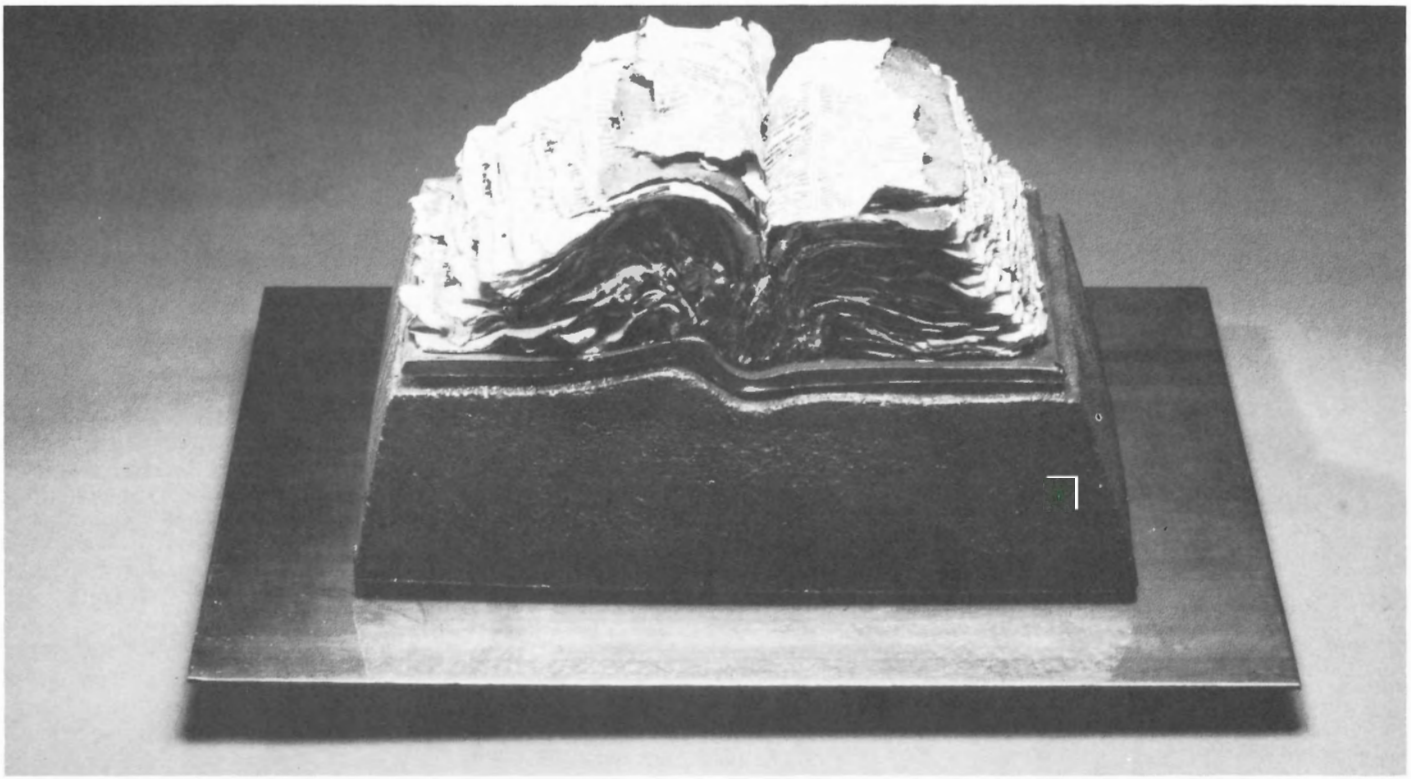
Eva Kwong came to the Brickworks intending to make flat murals, but the brickyard environment changed her mind, resulting in a series of tall sculptures.

Exhibitions

Sand Bible *(1982), 26" x 18" (71 x 45.8 cm).*

Bible with a Black Page *(1982), 10" x 8" (25.4 x 20.3 cm).*





Takako Araki

Mark Levy

Takako Araki was born into a Japanese family of master flower arrangers, and, as an artistically inclined daughter, she was expected to carry on the family tradition. Yet the indirect experience of the war and the devastating aftermath of the atomic bomb directed her to a medium and subject matter better suited to the emotions engendered by these events. After university training as a sculptor and glass blower, she turned to ceramics in 1961, creating Bibles which recollect marks of destruction. None of her Bibles appear to be intact; rather, they appear to have been exposed, negligently abandoned to rainstorms, sand, and dust, gnawed at by worms, scorched, and otherwise mutilated. Although she is neither Jewish nor Christian, Araki has selected the Old and New Testaments as universal symbols of the wisdom and fragility of human civilization. Indeed, these Bibles tell a cautionary tale about the loss of spiritual and moral values in a materialistic and bellicose age. Her Bibles plea eloquently for the toleration and respect of other people's symbols.

The fragility of Araki's Bibles, usually in an open book format, is conveyed by their thin porcelain pages. Each is covered by an aluminum leaf to prevent fusing during the firing process and later removed. Hebrew and English letters are then affixed through silk-screening. As the reader strains to make out the letters, his attention is directed to the variegated surfaces of these Bibles. The first three or four pages are stenciled with letters, although the viewer can only see the top page and a few word fragments. This level of craftsmanship reflects Araki's grounding in Zen meditation. In the Zen-inspired ceramics of Japan, even the insignificant or inconsequential steps of the process are carried out with great care, inbuing the finished work with depth and authenticity.

Each of the three *Sand Bibles* is buried in a rectangular base of simulated sand; they seem to be composed of tiny sand particles ready to disintegrate at the slightest breeze or motion. The warm tan color, uniform grainy texture, and contrast between the ragged edges of the pages and the straighter edges of the base, are important aesthetic considerations. Similar elements inform the other open Bibles, although there are a vew variations. In the *Black Page Bible,* a single black page is in vivid contrast with the frayed white pages. One of the *Degeneration Bibles* is covered with a thin layer of sparkling metallic grains, and the *Water Bible* has a translucent layer of cracked glaze over the surface. The metaphorical significance of the titles refer largely to specific acts of destruction: burning in the *Black Page Bible;* decay in the *Degeneration Bible;* and water damage in the *Water Bible.*

In addition to the open Bibles, Araki has also experimented with *Stone Bibles* and *Bread Bibles.* In the former, thin stenciled sheets are embedded or wrapped around stonelike ceramic objects. As stones are sacred objects in Japan, the linkage to the Bible is not inappropriate. Furthermore, the broken and damaged rocks remind us that nature too is fragile. In the *Golden Bread Bible,* inscriptions have been stenciled on a broken loaf of bread. The gold surface emphasizes the sacramental nature of bread as the body of Christ; and the broken bread may also be an allusion to Christ's martyrdom.

Given the paucity of good Judeo-Christian art, it is ironic that a nonbeliever should create such evocative examples. Yet it is often an outsider who suggests a new approach. The Japanese concept of "sabi," the aesthetics of weathering, age, and forlornness, inform her sculpture. Araki's Bibles have the pathos of Christian art, but her Japanese taste and refinement detain them from maudlin excess.

The pieces reviewed here were seen at the Braunstein Gallery in San Francisco (June 1–July 2, 1983).

Mark Levy teaches art history at California State University, Hayward, and is also a freelance art critic in the Bay Area.

Ann Christenson

Sarah Bodine

Spouted Vessel I, *18¾" (47.6 cm) high. Photo: Bror Karlsson.*

Julia's Candy Dish, *4½" x 25" (11.4 x 63.5 cm). Photo: Bror Karlsson.*

Untitled, *12¾" (32.4 cm) high. Photo: Bror Karlsson.*

Ann Christenson's work is a paradox; mass and balance defy vessel origin while detail affirms it. In the dialogue about clay form and decoration, Betty Woodman speaks of the "notion of containers and the idea of function"; Ann Christenson enters beyond utility. She manipulates the familiarity of function for other ends. A tray or platter is no longer a large, round, smooth surface on which to serve fruit or fish; it is a punched, slashed, truncated triangle whose sloping walls enclose a small, striated, crosshatched floor, gouged and scratchy, cracked and coarse, on which a fish would lie awkwardly, oozing unwanted juices, apples would seem overscale, tender grapes would be torn to shreds. Function is a reminiscence here, no more than a derogatory word. Perhaps these are truly antipots: Here is a tray which can't be used, a pitcher too heavy and awkward to pour from, a vase in which flowers would look pathetic—too delicate, soft, and graceful. In their droopy handles and spouts, these forms seem to scoff at function and the household that goes with it. With their primitive, bold, and simple patterning of squiggly and decomposing ridges and valleys, they seem to have been hauled from a junkyard and displayed as remnants of a civilization—home and family—which is no longer viable. They could be construed as a feminist reaction to the drudgery of housework, a boredom with manners, a rejection of the civilities expressed by fine china. Maybe the work advocates a return to the primitive human drive for individual expression and less restrained social rules.

When Christenson's work is examined for its formal attributes, the paradox remains unresolved. Certainly there are precedents for the pedestal vessels. Meant to give height and therefore dignity to the vessel they support (or sometimes used purely for function—to hold up a round-bottomed water jug, for example), pedestals have been used from the time of the ancient Chinese and Greeks. However, in elevating clunky, loosely formed, nonfunctional vessels, Christenson's metal lath pedestals lend false dignity to her work. The contradiction continues in the highly calculated balance of the slapdash and fingerpaint-fresh pots on these latticework bases, recalling the curious topple-resistance of piles in a junkyard.

Much of this ground, and particularly the play on vessel/nonvessel, is familiar. Because Christenson herself emerges from a vessel orientation, the imagery is predictable, the progression logical. Previous vessels, however, have used many of the same compositional and proportional devices, such as the prominent latticework base—the holes and slashes making up the latticework being formerly cut only into the foot of the vessel—and the bulbous or triangular shapes repeated in teapots, pitchers, and cups. Yet these were clearly functional pieces.

Perhaps I am reading too much into Ann Christenson's vestigial vessel forms, but I find this to be the major problem with the work: I cannot tell what the pots are saying and why they changed from functional to nonfunctional. Their imagery relies on two separate universes, and it seems to prolong rather than resolve their antipathy. Rather than a tension being created here, I find merely a confusion between function and sculpture, primitiveness and dignity, looseness and control.

Ann Christenson's work was shown at the Elements Gallery, New York (May 12–June 4, 1983).

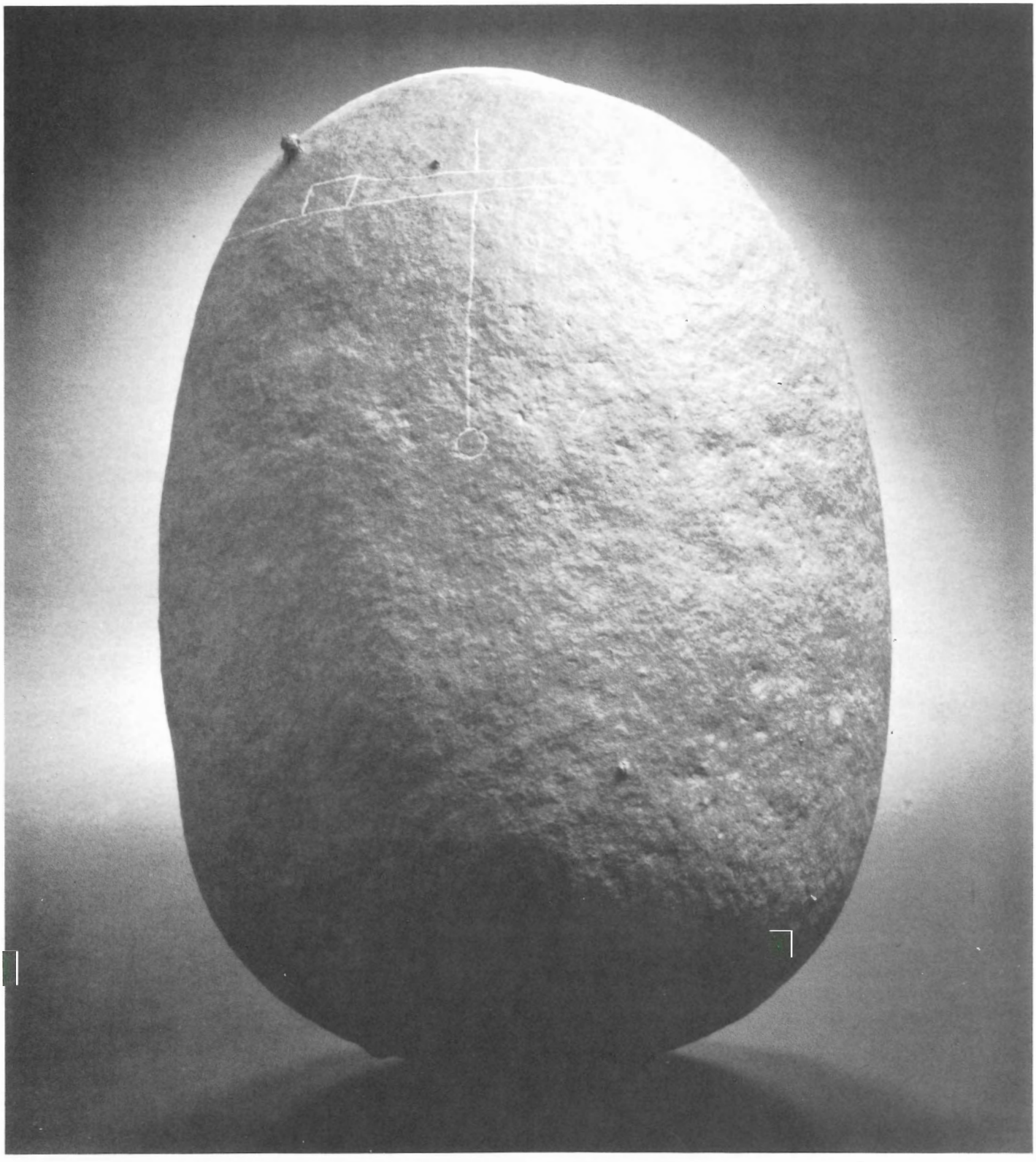
Sarah Bodine is a freelance writer, the editor of Metalsmith *magazine, and a potter.*

Lady Victorian, *15" (38 cm) high.*

Avoiding the Void, *30½" (77.5 cm) high.*

Expansion of a Kingdom, *13" (33 cm) high. Courtesy Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco.*

A Short Reign, *8" x 6" x 26" (20 x 15.2 x 66 cm). Courtesy Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco.*



Keiji Ito

Mark Levy

For Muneharu Kuzumi, a leading patriarch of Japanese Shintoism, Keiji Ito's ceramic sculptures "reveal the naive faith of ancient peoples." Indeed, both Ito's representational and abstract stoneware objects embody an archetypal content in their unassuming reflection of Japanese folk traditions. Yet Ito is not a folk artist; his form, language, and surfaces have a greater sophistication.

Stones were revered as fertility symbols in the early culture of Japan; by often approximating the shape of the male and female genitalia, they were thought to contain powerful constellations of regenerative forces. Often they became the focal point of ritual observances in shrines and sacred places. Several of Ito's objects recall the shape, texture, and magic of sacred fertility stones, although they are manipulated so that the viewer is always conscious of them as art objects.

In *The Moderation of a Defeated Man,* Ito has broken the smooth oval outline of an egg-shaped object. In the wide indentation, he has placed a phallic-shaped stone. The broken oval, untraditional in the vocabulary of Japanese sculpture, is reminiscent of Brancusi's *New Born* (1912), although Ito disclaims Western influence. But like Brancusi's, Ito's sculptures are reduced to formal essentials, allowing for the maximum self-expression of the materials. His *Moderation of a Defeated Man* also recalls Brancusi's *Adam and Eve* (1916–21) in its interpenetration of masculine and feminine shapes, the aesthetic play between different materials, and the use of materials to suggest gender; while Brancusi employs oak for the masculine shapes and chestnut for the feminine, Ito has chosen soft earthy stoneware for the oval and hard granite for the stone insert.

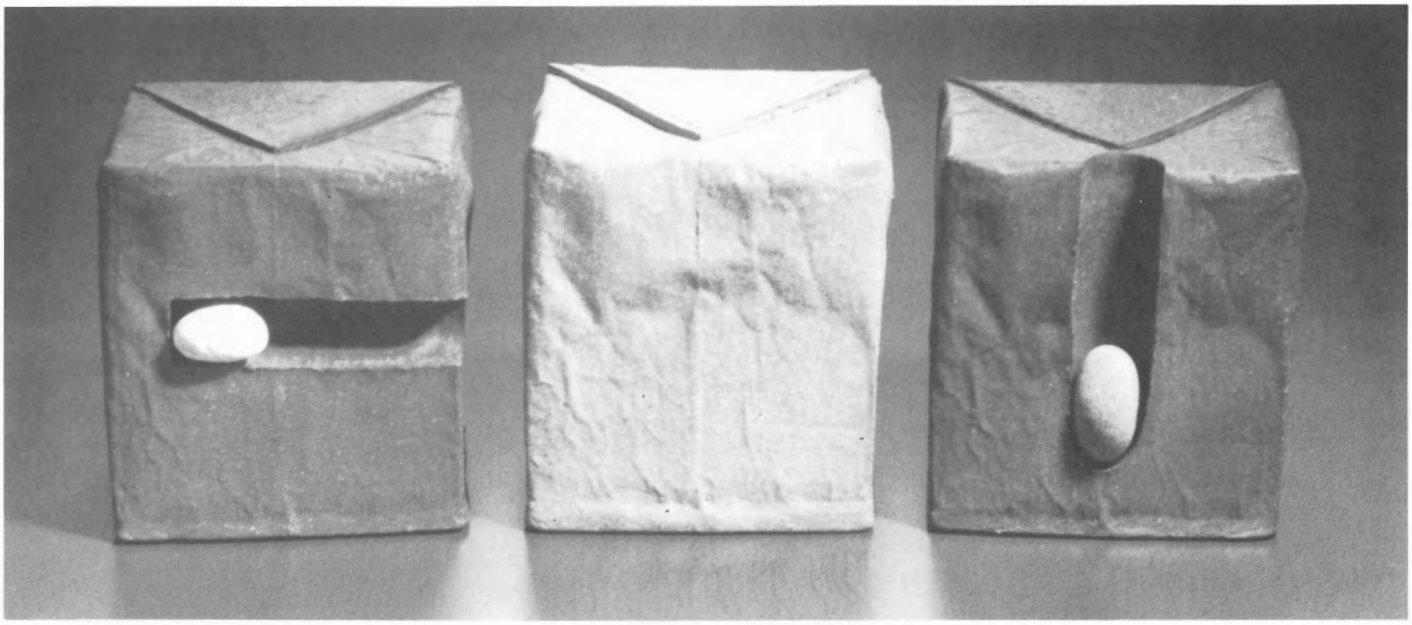
In addition to sacred stones, Ito's semiabstract objects suggest models of shrines or small temples, stupas, totem poles, neolithic power spots, as well as ritual emblems of authority. White drawings of circles, mandalas, cosmic symbols, and other arcana also frequently appear on the stoneware surfaces.

Ito uses a steel stylus to incise the dry hardened clay and then fills these lines with a white glaze. The textural and color differences between the dark grainy stoneware and the smoother white lines, coupled with the artist's ability to duplicate the weathering process, contribute to the forceful presence of the works. The simulation of weathering is especially effective in *Footsteps of the Gods,* where larger-than-life representations of feet in varying stages of apparent decomposition resemble ancient Buddhist relics.

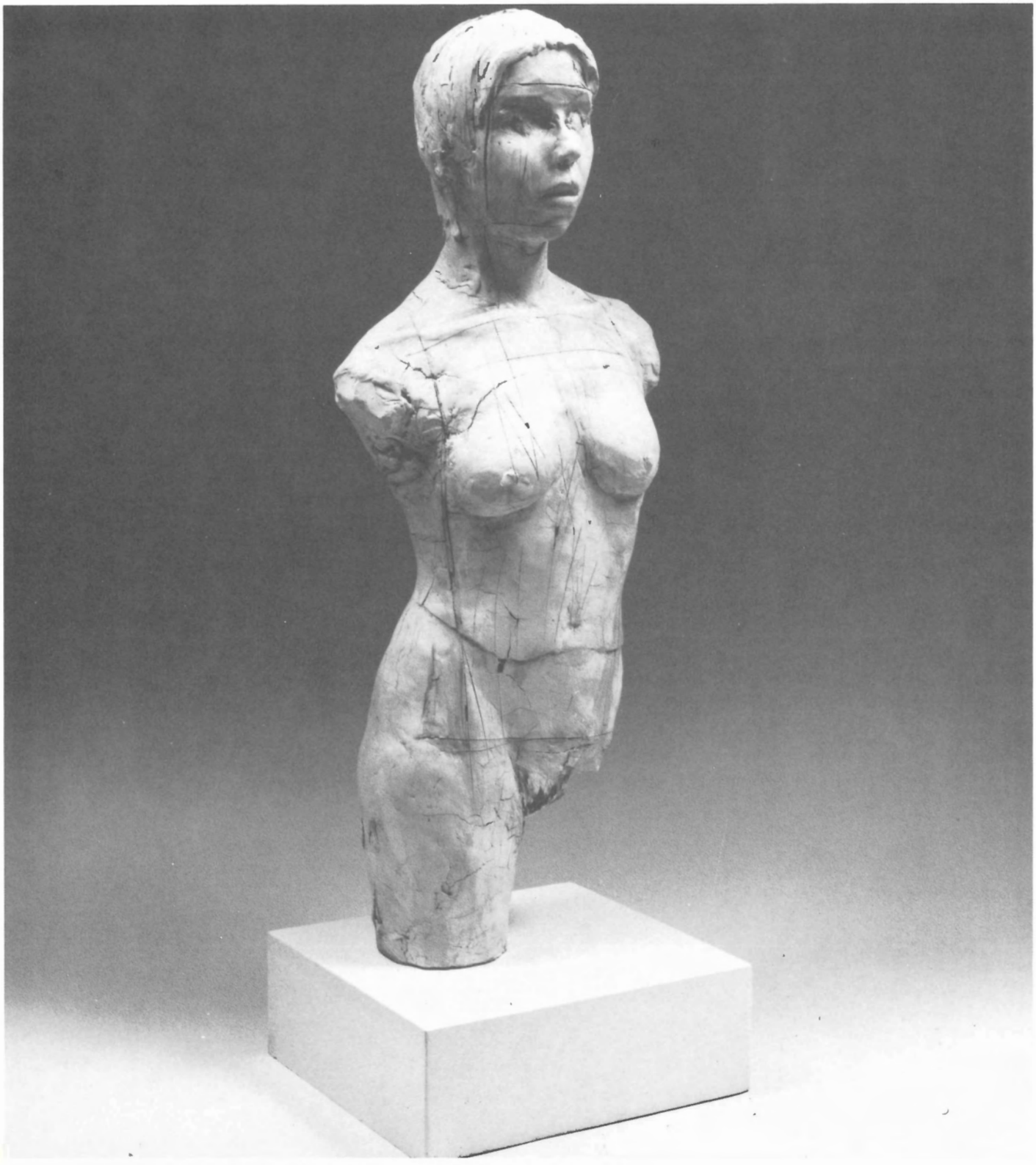
Notwithstanding the symbolic weight of his sculptures, Ito occasionally interjects a lighter note. In *A Short Realm,* he has constructed three square boxes with indentations and stones—a hard-edged counterpart to *The Moderation of a Defeated Man.* Yet the stoneware surface of these boxes is a trompe l'oeil imitation of paper packaging. To be sure, packaging is a kind of religious ritual in Japan, but here it evokes a smile, considering the profound meanings embodied in Ito's other sculptures.

Unfortunately, the titles of Ito's works are neither concise nor functional. Ito is not verbally oriented, so he has let an intellectual friend label his pieces with idosyncratic titles that restrict their metaphorical associations and cloud their spiritual dimension. Keiji Ito says that his ceramics "come straight from the spirit." I take this to mean that the origins of his sculpture are unpremeditated and intuitive. Self-effacing craftsmanship, small-scale intimacy, and simple shapes enable his inner voice to speak eloquently. For me, the proper place for Ito's work is not a commercial, but religious context, where they might invite their due reverence and contemplation.

The pieces reviewed here were seen at the Braunstein Gallery in San Francisco (June 1–July 2, 1983).



Stele VI, *30" (76.2 cm) high. Photo: Sid Levine. Courtesy Anna Gardner Gallery, Stinson Beach.*



Blue Two Step *(1982), 8½" (21.6 cm) high. Photo: M. Lee Fatherree. Courtesy Quay Gallery, San Francisco.*

the sun never sets. Its youth, surfboard in hand, harnessed their energies in search of the ultimate wave. Its vehicle was itself a unique American artform—the meticulously crafted custom car. The sleek surfaces and bright colors of surfboards and hot rods reappear in the work of many other California artists: the plastic paintings of Craig Kauffman, the fiberglass constructions of DeWain Valentine, the lacquered aluminum paintings of Billy Al Bengston, and the ceramic cups of Ken Price.

Nagle's exquisite *objets* must be seen as yet another expression of this singular culture, where appearance is all, where consumer products are the icons of materialism. The artist superimposes on this native cult his own particular form of object worship—a deep admiration for the Momoyama ceramics of seventeenth-century Japan. Naturally, the Japanese nobility who possessed these ceramics cherished them with the same fervor (albeit a religious one) that Americans hold for their cars.

Nagle usually fabricates his forms by making a mold, slip-casting the piece, and then destroying the mold before going on to the next. The pinstripe borders that frame his squares of contrasting pigment are awesomely accurate. And there is, of course, his use of color. Nagle repeatedly glazes and fires his forms to achieve those renowned dull-bright colors that are not any one hue, but a mist comprising dozens. ("I was involved with hot rods when I was a kid, and I knew how to put on thirty coats of lacquer as well as the next guy."[5]) Indeed, many argue that his art is one of color above all else, which causes them to question his format. And although Nagle himself wants his work "to be as much like painting as possible,"[6] it is inescapably part of the *objets d'art* tradition within which most ceramics operate. And it is more about material, texture, surface, color, about simply being an object, than it is about "pure painting."

The recent work easily rebuts those who would label him a colorist, though it remains frontalist in orientation. He continues to explore the formal possibilities of his format (the only indication that these are "vessels" being the tiny hole at top) and newer examples more often recall architectural elements than "cups." We find, for example, pieces that confront us with a full rectangle of wall, which, like a façade, hides what lies behind it. The stucco surface reinforces our perception. Other works have carved out façades that remind us of the Deco and Moderne architects' fondness for complex archways. Yet other façades recede in steplike fashion; the niche that once held knickknacks and other treasured objects, in Nagle's hands, becomes an object unto itself. Finally, the artist continues to handbuild some of his forms, and these are the most cuplike. Some, with their "handles" resembling skyward-pointed noses next to cylindrical, mouthlike openings, are even anthropomorphic. One of the most interesting new works takes the form of a two-handled loving cup: the crenelated edge and red glaze flecked with turquoise seem to indicate that Nagle has learned something from George E. Ohr.

For all his hip swagger and seeming laxity, Ron Nagle exemplifies the deliberate work ethic of square America we might expect him to disdain. It is true he scorned then-prevailing taste by using earthenware clay and bright, hobby-kit glazes on his first cup forms, that his "cups" were, in fact, useless as cups, that his glazes run in pendant drips that would shame any right-thinking potter. But for all that, Nagle is a perfectionist who labors intensely at his art.

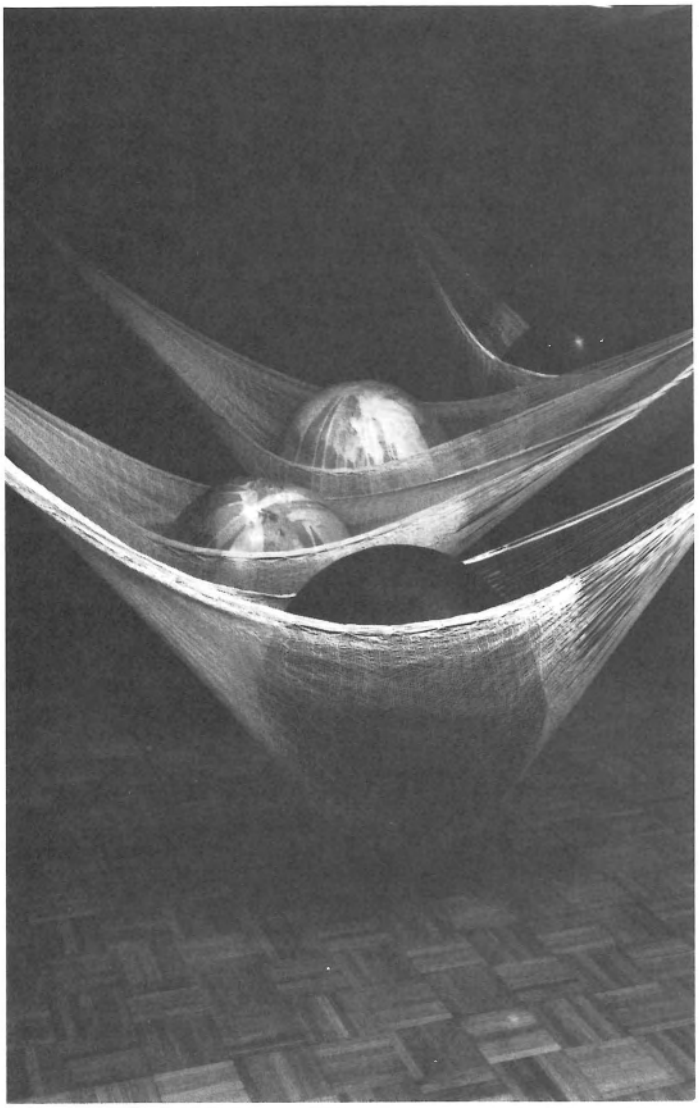
And for all his style, Ron Nagle is no slavish stylist; he has followed his own path. It was not "cool" to make precious little ceramics in the fifties and early sixties (many called it "pansy art"), and the tiny scale of his work bothered would-be collectors.[7] But Nagle has persisted, sure of his course. His contribution to art, ceramic or otherwise, deserves a wide audience.

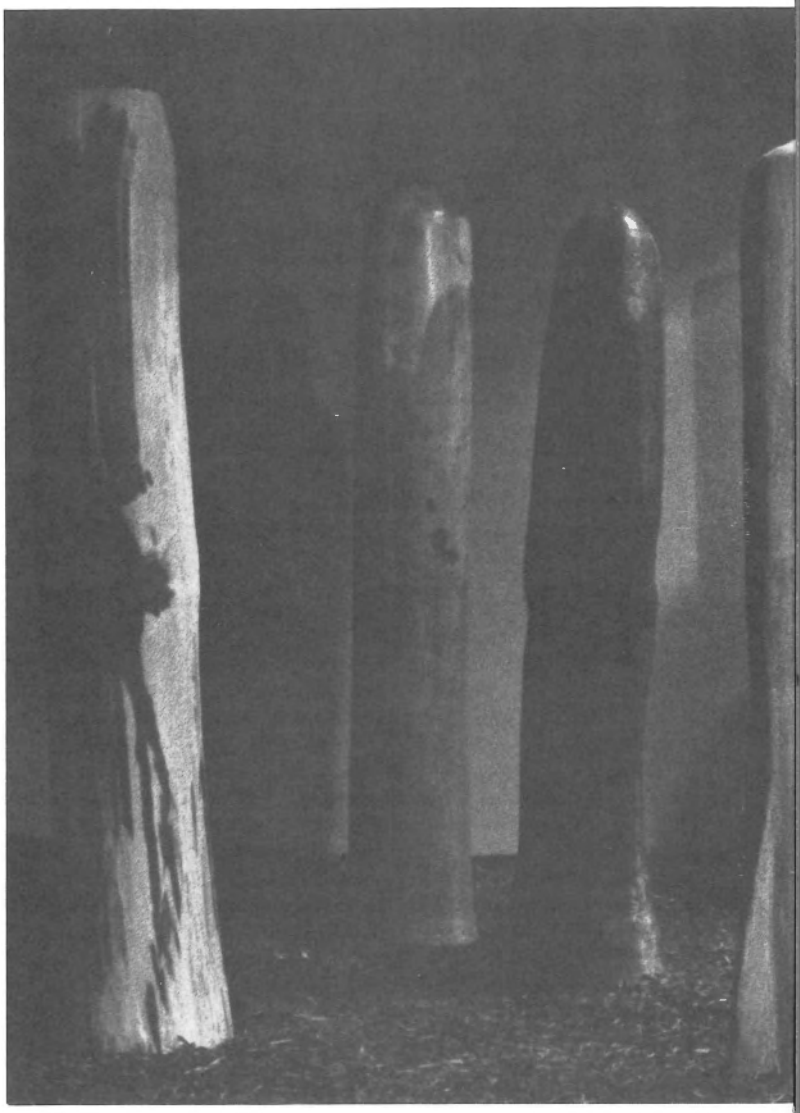
1. As found in Susan Wechsler, *Low-Fire Ceramics* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1981), p. 101.
2. Ron Nagle, lecture, "Second International Ceramics Symposium," New York, July 1981.
3. Wechsler, *Low-Fire Ceramics,* p. 102.
4. Nagle, lecture.
5. Wechsler, *Low-Fire Ceramics,* p. 104.
6. Ibid., p. 105.
7. "People would say, 'Yeah, I really like that stuff, but I don't want to buy anything 'cause it's too small and I'm not getting my money's worth.' I'm not selling by the pound, you know, but it's a funny thing, people want something a little bigger, especially if it is made out of clay." (Nagle, lecture.) For a time Nagle did make some "big" work—twelve inches high—but his preferred scale remains three to eight inches.

Ron Nagle is represented by Charles Cowles Gallery, New York (September 10–October 1, 1983), and by Quay Gallery, San Francisco.

Toshiko Takaezu

Ann Tsubota





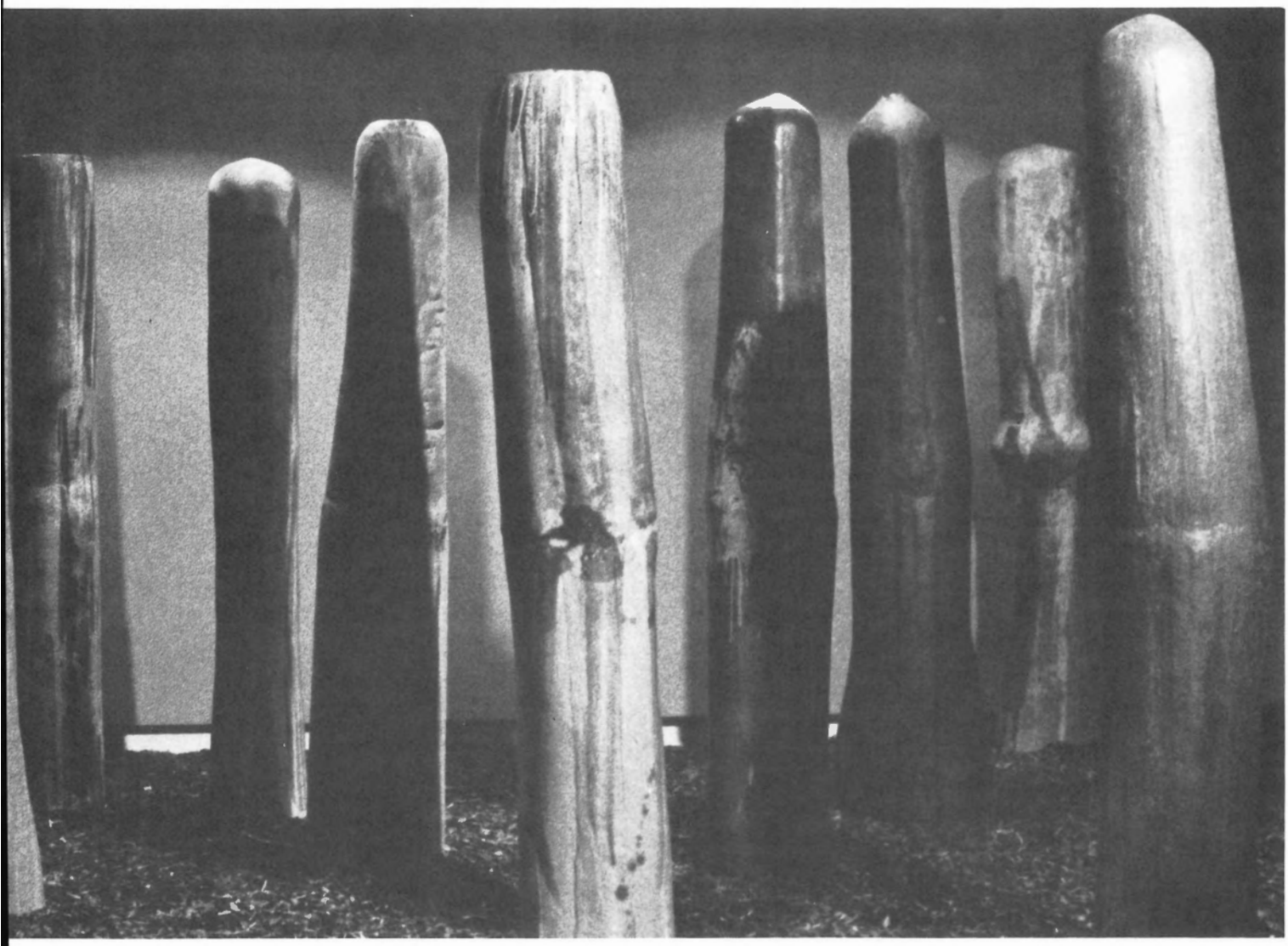
Fundamentally, Toshiko Takaezu is involved in the process of clay—a unique and intimate involvement at that. In most of her work, notably the *Moon Pots* and *The Ceramic Forest,* she leaves her pinch marks where the seams of the large press-molded forms are joined together. The soft indentations of her fingers on the clay as the potter's wheel turns is evident in the smaller closed forms. The impressions are not overly emphasized nor are they smoothed away by means of a metal rib. This soft tactile quality plays hide and seek with the randomness, boldness, and tonal qualities of her glazing. The poured, dripped, brushed glazes work best when the forms and surface color play and dance with each other in strong tensions and bold contrasts, playful images, or layers of shapes and colors. In particular, a large elongated closed form, *Black Beauty,* whose silky tones of ochre and sable weave patterns of color into each other, stand out in its elegance of form and seem to welcome a touching hand. These works pose no visual or aesthetic threat to the viewer. One wants to view the pieces as close as possible, each look revealing new and more interesting details of tone and texture in the surfaces.

Equally important to Takaezu's work is the firing process. She has learned it well. She can control the heat yet knows how to dance with it, taking risks with textures and colors, improvising at the right moment. In this respect, her work stands apart from the more controlled, sometimes contrived, overly styled work of some younger ceramists. Takaezu's roots are planted in the spirit of the Abstract Expressionists: The kinetic energy of Jackson Pollack combined with the introspection of Mark Rothko come to mind. The titles of several works, such as *Gaea,* evoke mythology. A series of plaques refer to lunar eclipses; numerous pieces refer to the moon. It appears Takaezu has studied the shades and emotions of darkness and shadow.

Everything from Takaezu's familiar small and large closed forms glazed with the colors of beached shells, her *Moon Balls,* the *Ceramic Forest,* the abstract expressionist wall plaques to weaving and newer bronze castings were arranged throughout the multilevel gallery space. The intensity of Takaezu's focus is made

Gaea. *Courtesy The Trout Gallery, Dickenson College. Photo: Matthew Opilo.*

Ceramic Forest, *66" (168 cm) high. Courtesy The Trout Gallery, Dickenson College. Photo: Matthew Opilo.*

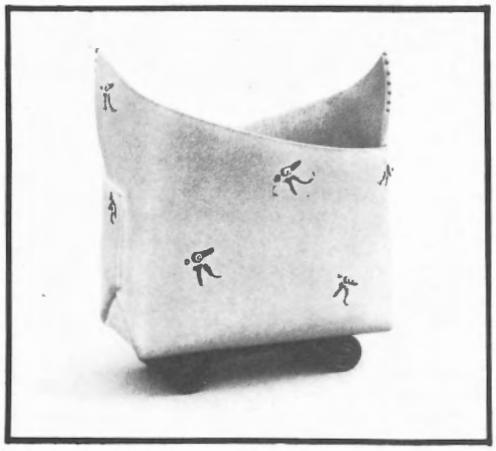


apparent to the viewer partly by the intermingling of intimate and large spaces in the gallery, which allow for display of Takaezu's larger works in clay. The mauve, fabric-covered walls play nicely against the abstract glaze forms of which Takaezu is a master. Yet the exhibit was uneven. Pieces crowded one another. Three museum showcases, overstuffed with small closed forms and bowls, recalled the endless rooms of Oriental pottery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Several bronze pieces seemed out of place. There was a medium-size *Bronze Moon* placed on a square bronze block. On a wall hung the four-piece *Moon Cycle,* flat squares from which spheres emerge, each succeeding sphere projecting farther out. A totem of flattened bronze spheres seemed to have been inspired by Brancusi. All the bronzes have a dark patina. The immediacy of process and the tactileness associated with Takaezu's work are lost in these. They are too mute, cold, minimal, untouched by her hand.

In recent years, Takaezu has undertaken to work in a large scale. The *Ceramic Forest,* a group of thirteen closed narrow cylinders, are all about five-and-a-half feet tall. Each cylinder has its own unique form and glaze treatment. The pieces create a violent image of strong shapes thrust into the earth. Half buried, unexploded bombs come to mind. Or perhaps a postnuclear war landscape. The imagery is provocative, uneasy, awkward. One applauds the risks in this body of work. It is when such adventures into unknown territory are taken that Takaezu's work demands close inspection.

Dickinson College has awarded Takaezu the Dickinson College Arts Award in conjunction with this exhibition at the Trout Gallery, Emil R. Weiss Center for the Arts, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania (January 28–March 18, 1983).

Ann Tsubota is a clay sculptor and potter. She is an assistant professor of ceramics at Somerset County College, North Branch, New Jersey.



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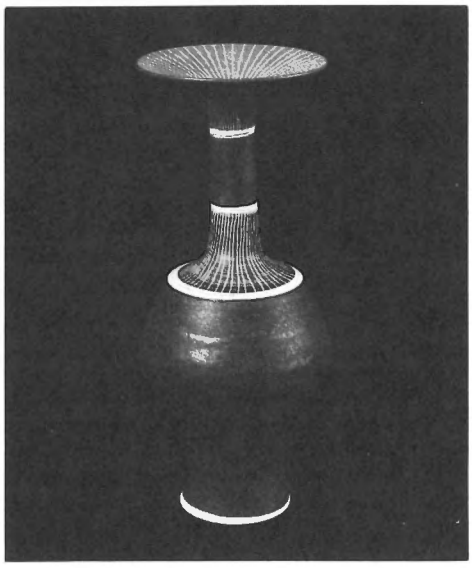

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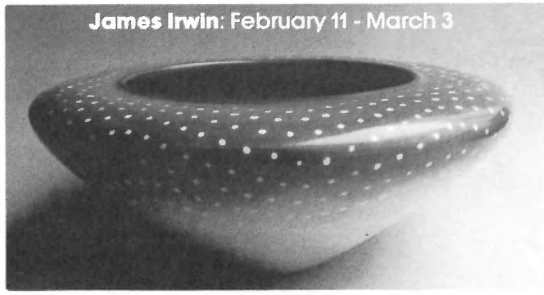

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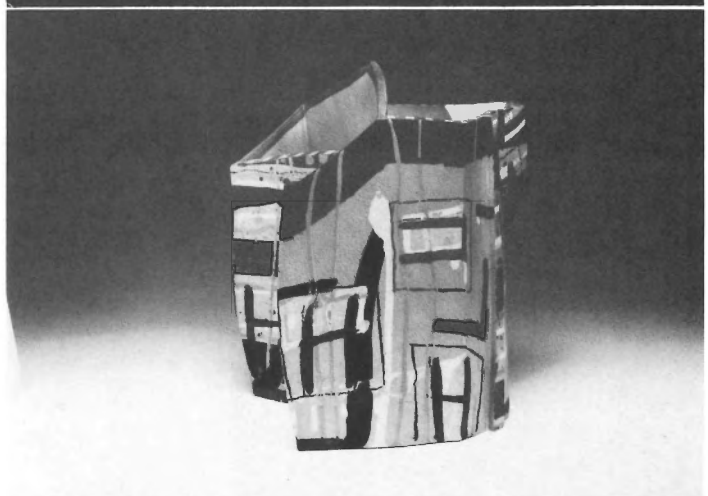

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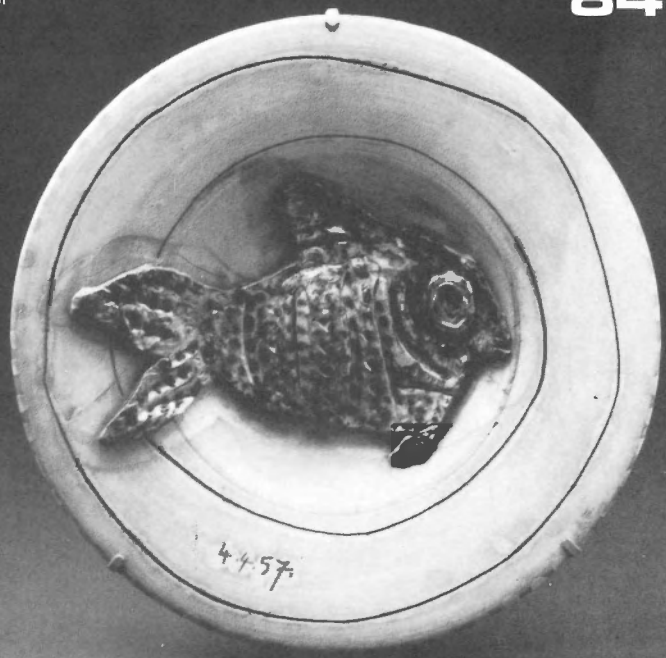

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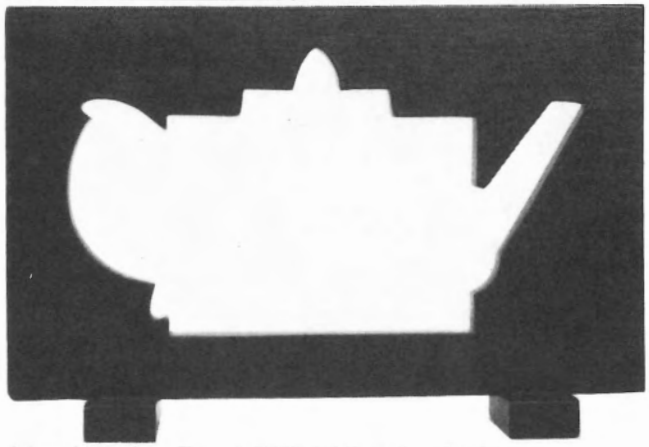

Léopold Foulem, Teapot, 1983 21.5 cm. h., x 32.5 cm. w.

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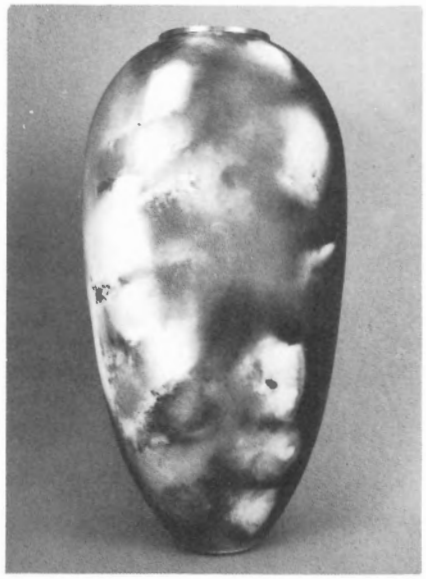

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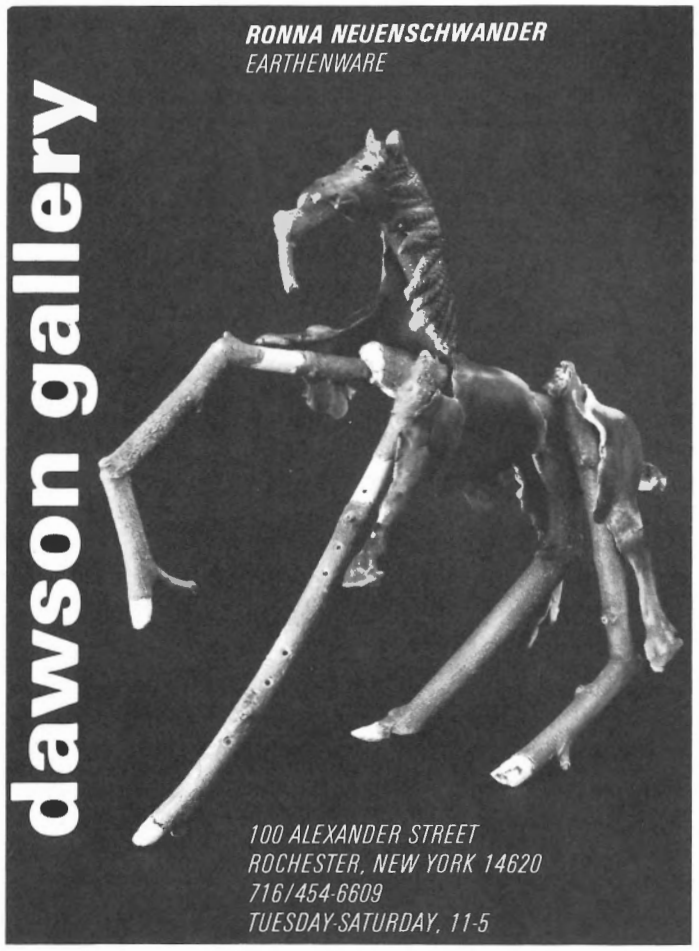

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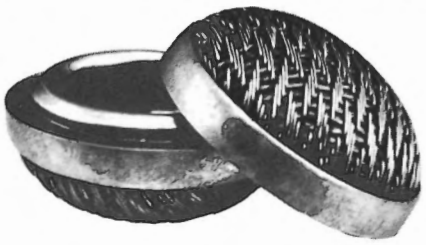

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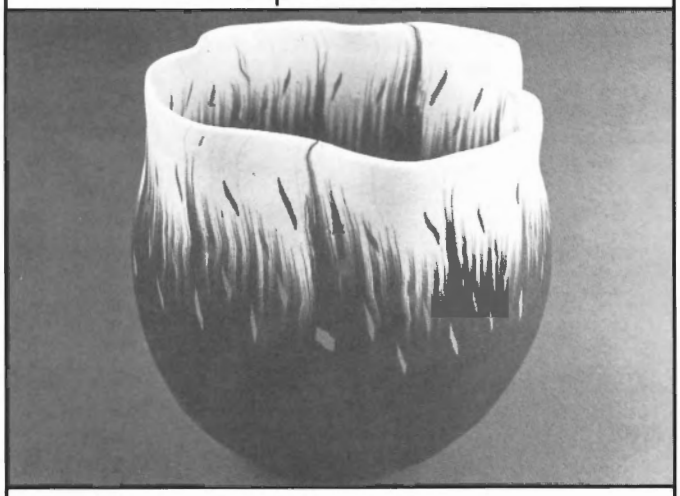

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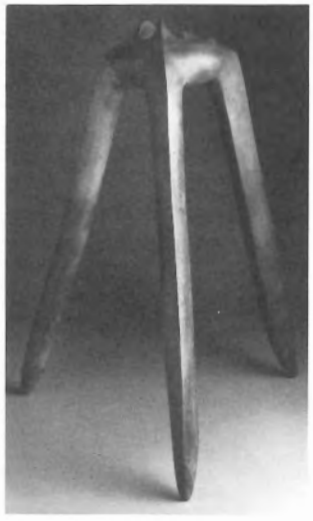

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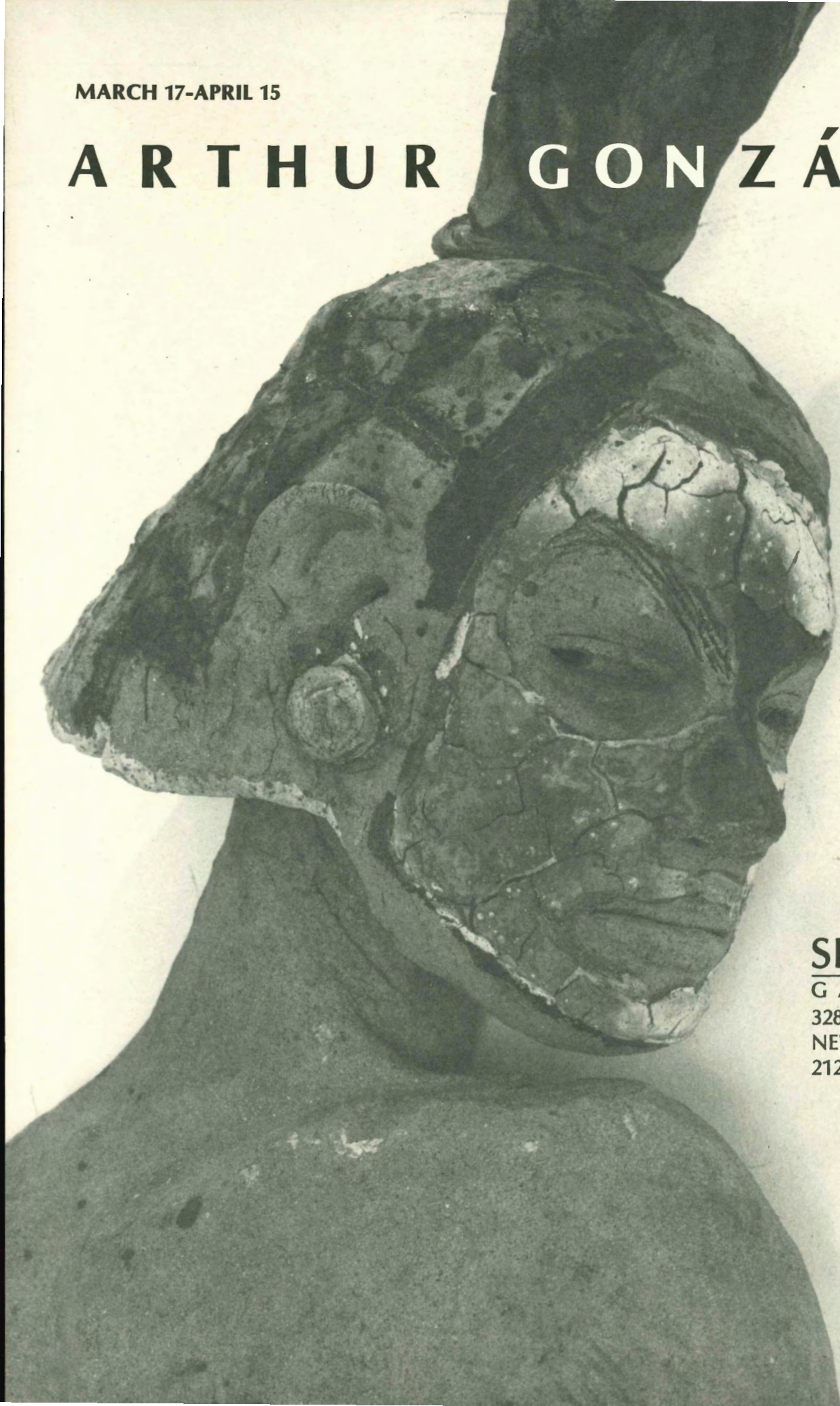

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